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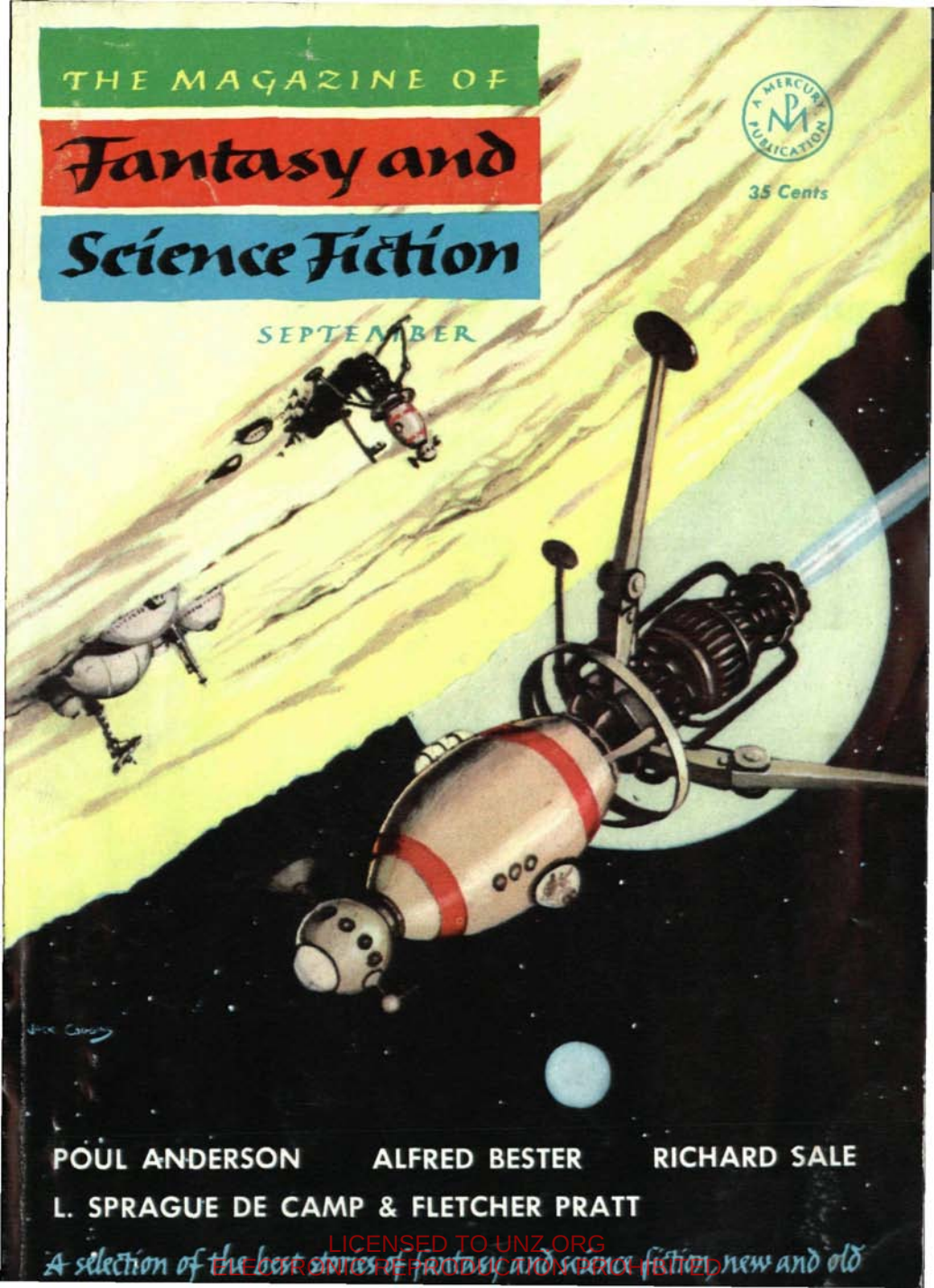

POUL ANDERSON ALFRED BESTER RICHARD SALE

L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP & FLETCHER PRATT

A selection of the best stories of fantasy and science fiction, new and old

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The courses mentioned in this quotation were originally set up by Dr. C. S. Draper. Since Dr. Draper assumed the responsibility of Chairman of the Department of Aeronautical Engineering, Prof. Wrigley has taken over the teaching of these courses.

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

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Cover by Jack Coggins

(space ship over base on Ariel, Uranus in background)

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Policies are made to be broken when circumstances demand. For a long time we intended to publish no serials in F&SF; but then Poul Anderson sent us a story whose length was too great for one issue — and whose rejection was unthinkable! So here begins our first serial; and we'll be curious to hear what you think both of the story itself and of the new policy. If you're in agreement, we'll do our best to bring you soon other outstanding long stories.

More and more editors and critics are dropping the undefinable distinction between science fiction and fantasy and referring simply to "science-fantasy"; and the chief reason for this is not so much a literary as a purely scientific one. Scientific thinking is itself breaking down any conceivable arbitrary distinction between "the possible" and "the impossible"; and some of the most stimulating modern science-fantasy is being written (as Groff Conklin so ably showed in his recent SCIENCE-FICTION ADVENTURES IN DIMENSION) *in the borderlands created by advanced mathematical and physical thought concerning alternate universes, parallel variant space-time continua. Mr. Anderson has invented one of the most fascinating such variants we've ever read, and used it as the setting for a splendidly stirring piece of sheer story-telling. When it comes to the purely irresistible impetus of adventure, complete with damsels both pleasing and perilous and armed combats worthy of a great folk-epic (will you ever forget the Battle of the Vault in* VAULT OF TIME?), *Mr. Anderson is our nomination for the mantle of Rider Haggard — and we doubt if he's ever proved that claim more enchantingly than in this story.*

Three Hearts and Three Lions

by POUL ANDERSON

First of Two Parts

BY CHANCE, I HAPPENED to be working for the outfit which hired Holger Carlsen on his graduation, and got to know him quite well in the year or two that followed. This was in 1938–9, which now seems unbelievably far away.

Holger was a Dane who came over to the States to study engineering and,

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as I said, got a job here and was thinking of getting naturalized. He was an amiable, slow-spoken young fellow, very down-to-earth and matter-of-fact, with simple tastes in living style and humor — though every so often he broke loose and went to a certain Danish restaurant for *smørrebrød* and *akvavit*. Apart from a good, practical, but unspectacular engineering talent, he wasn't at all remarkable mentally. His physique was another story: he was gigantic, six feet four and so broad in the shoulders that he didn't really look his height. He'd played football, of course, and could have starred on his college team except that his studies had taken too much time. His face was of the rugged sort: square, high cheekbones, a slightly dented nose, yellow hair and blue eyes. If he hadn't been just a trifle shy, he could have cut a swathe through all the femininity in New York, but as it was he probably had no more than his share of such adventures. All in all, just a nice average guy, what was later called a good Joe.

He told me something about his background. "Believe it or no," he grinned, "I really vas the baby in all the cartoons, you know, the vun left on the doorstep. I must ha' been only a few days old ven I vas found in a courtyard in Helsingør. That's the very pretty town you call Elsinore, Hamlet's old home, you know. No, I never knew vere I came from. Such happenings is very rare in Denmark, so the police tried hard to find out; but they never did. I vas soon adopted by the Carlsen family. Othervise there is not'ing unusual in my life."

That's what he thought.

I remember one time when I did persuade him to go with me to a lecture by a visiting physicist: one of those magnificent types which only Britain seems to produce, scientist and philosopher and social critic and wit, the Renaissance mind come back in a gentler shape. This man was discussing the new cosmology, which always makes me think a little wistfully of ancient times when the universe was merely strange — not incomprehensible. He wound up his talk with some frank speculation about what we might discover in the future. If relativity and quantum mechanics have shown that the observer is inseparable from the world he observes, if logical positivism has demonstrated how many of our supposedly solid facts are mere constructs and conventions, if the psychic research people have shown man's mind to possess unsuspected powers, it begins to seem that some of those old myths and sorceries were a bit more than superstition. Hypnotism and the curing of psychosomatic conditions by faith — those were once called pure legend. How much of what we disbelieve today may have been grounded in fragmentary observation, long ago? And that is only a mystery of our own cosmos. But wave mechanics admits the possibility of one other entire universe coexisting with ours, and the lecturer said it was not hard

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to write the equations for an infinity of such parallel worlds, each with its own laws of nature. In which case — somewhere in the boundlessness of reality, anything you can imagine must actually exist!

Holger yawned through most of it, and made sarcastic remarks when we were having a drink afterward. "These mat'ematicians vork their brains so hard it is no vonder they snap into metaphysics ven off duty. Eqval and opposite reaction!"

"You're using the right term," I grinned. "Although you don't mean to."

"What do you mean?"

" 'Metaphysics.' The word means, literally, after, or over, physics. In other words, when the physics you know, the kind you measure with your damned slide rule, ends, metaphysics begins. And that's where we are right now, my lad — at the beginning of being beyond physics."

"Whew!" He gulped down his drink and gestured for another. "It has rubbed off on you."

"Think about it. Do we really know the exact relationship of space and time and matter? *What* are you, Holger? *Where* are you? Or rather, *where-when* are you?"

"I'm here and now, drinking some not very good liquor!"

"You're in balance — in tune? — with a specific continuum. So am I — with the same one. That continuum embraces a specific universe, one that functions according to a very complex series of laws. We know some of those laws; hence we have organized bodies of knowledge we call chemistry, physics, astronomy —"

"And voodoo!" He lifted his glass. "Time you stopped t'inking and begun some serious drinking. Skaal!"

I let it go. Holger never mentioned my speculations again, but I'm positive he later remembered them . . . and possibly understood them. But enough of that, let me get on with the story.

The war broke out overseas, and Holger grew more unhappy about it all the time. He had no special political opinions, but he hated the Nazis with a fervor that surprised me. It surprised him, too, in a way. When the Germans occupied his country, he went on a three-day jag.

The occupation went peacefully for a while, and Holger dropped his notions of enlisting in Canada. But by 1941 there was trouble starting up in Denmark, and it became clear that the States would sooner or later be drawn into the war. It took Holger a lot of time and beer to make up his mind what to do. The most effective way to hit back was, plainly, to join the British or American army, but somehow he got a fixation that he must return home. It didn't make sense, but he couldn't get rid of it, and finally he yielded. He quit his job, we gave him a farewell party, and he sailed for

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Spain. From there he was able to wangle a trip back; Denmark was technically neutral, though you were beginning to hear gunshots and explosions.

I imagine the Germans kept an eye on him for a while, suspecting he might be an agent. He gave them no trouble at first, but stayed on his job at Burmeister & Wain. It wasn't till mid-1942 that he really went underground.

The story of his labors doesn't come in here till we get to a certain night in the late summer of 1943. Then there was a man who had to be gotten out of Denmark. He had information and abilities which the Allies needed rather badly. The Germans watched him incessantly, for they knew what he was. Nevertheless, the underground spirited him out of his home and conveyed him down to the Sound, where a boat was waiting to take him to Sweden.

It may never be known whether the Nazi police were on his trail or whether it was simply a German patrol which spotted men on the shore long after curfew. Someone cried out, someone else fired, and then the battle was on. It was an open, stony beach, with just enough light from the stars and the illuminated Swedish coast to see by. No way to retreat. The boat got going, and the underground band settled down to hold off the Germans till it was well away.

Holger Carlsen fully expected to die, but there wasn't time to be afraid. He crouched on the pebbly sand, the Luger hot in his fingers, and fired into the shadowy mass of the enemy. Bullets were whining around his ears, someone screamed and held his belly and coughed blood, and Holger took aim and fired some more.

Then all his world blew up in flame and darkness.

I

He woke slowly, and lay for a while without awareness of anything but the pain in his head. Then, gradually, vision came, and he saw the root of a tree in front of his nose. When he turned over, a soft, pungent blanket of old fallen leaves crackled gently under him.

"Hell!" he muttered and sat up.

He was in a forest, and it was daylight. When he touched his head, he felt clotted blood. His thinking was still slow, but he realized that a bullet must have creased his scalp and knocked him out. A few centimeters lower — He shivered.

But what had happened since? He lay in a forest, and there was no one else around, no sign of any other being. It looked as if his friends had escaped, taking him along, and hidden him in some little tract of woods; but why, then, had they abandoned him?

He got up, holding his head. He felt stiff, and there was a great hunger in

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him. Sunlight slanting between high old trees told him that it was afternoon. Morning light doesn't have that peculiar golden quality. Heh! He'd slept the clock around! He sneezed.

Not far off was a small brook, tinkling through deep sun-flecked shadows. He went over and drank thirstily. The clear cold water helped a lot, and he looked about him and tried to figure out where he was. Grib's Wood?

No, by Heaven. This forest was — wild. The trees were huge and ancient, beech and ash and oak thickly covered with moss, and the underbrush was tangled under them. There was no such area in all Denmark; there hadn't been since the Middle Ages.

A gray squirrel ran up a trunk as he stared, and a pair of starlings flew away. Through a rift in the leafage, he saw a hovering bird, a hawk. Were any hawks left in his country?

Well, maybe a few, he didn't know. He was still too groggy to think. He bathed his head, drank some more, and wondered what to do next. If he'd been left here by his friends, there must be a good reason, and he shouldn't wander off. At the same time, something might have happened to them since —

"Well, my boy, you can hardly stay here overnight," he said. "Let's at least find out where we are." His voice seemed unnaturally loud in the rustling stillness.

Another noise — He tensed before recognizing it as the impatient whicker of a horse. That made him feel better. There must be a farm nearby. His legs were fairly steady now, and he pushed through a screen of young trees to find the horse.

When he did, he stopped dead. "No," he said aloud.

It was a gigantic animal, a stallion the size of a Percheron though its build was more graceful, and sleek and black as polished midnight. It was not tethered, but had an elaborate fringed bridle leading off a silver-worked headstall; on its back was a high-peaked saddle, a sweeping, colorfully embroidered blanket, and bundle of some kind.

Holger swallowed and approached closer. All right, so somebody liked to ride around in such style. "Hallo," he called. "Hallo, is anyone there?"

The horse tossed his flowing mane and whinnied eagerly as he neared. A velvety nose nuzzled him, and the big hoofs lifted as if to be off. Holger patted the brute — he'd never seen a horse so friendly to strangers — and looked closer. Engraved in the silver of the headstall was a word: *Papillon*.

"*Papillon*," he said, just to hear his own voice.

The horse whinnied again, stamped, and dragged at the bridle he held.

"Papillon, is that your name?" Holger stroked him. "It's French for butterfly, isn't it? Fancy calling a big fellow like you Butterfly."

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The bundle behind the saddle caught his attention, and he stepped over to look at it. What the devil — chain mail!

"*Hallo!*" he called again. "Is anyone there? Help!"

There was no answer. A crow jeered at him.

Looking around, Holger saw a long steelheaded shaft leaning against a tree — a lance, it was, a regular medieval lance. Now he got excited. His restless life had made him less law-abiding than most of his countrymen, and he didn't hesitate to untie the bundle and spread it out. There was quite a bit: a byrnie long enough to reach his knees, a helmet, a dagger, and the quilted underpadding for such armor. Then there were some changes of clothes, consisting of cloaks, tunics, breeches, and so on, all of coarse, gaily dyed cloth trimmed with fur. Going around to the port side of the horse, he wasn't surprised to find a sword and shield hanging there. The shield was of the conventional heraldic form, about four feet long, and obviously new; when he took the canvas cover off its metal surface, he saw a design of three crouching lions, gold on azure, alternating with three red hearts.

It struck a dim remembrance in him somewhere, and he stood puzzling over it for a while. Was it — Wait. The Danish coat of arms. No, that had nine hearts. The memory sank down again.

Now what in the world — He scratched his head. Had somebody been organizing a pageant, or — He drew the sword. It was a huge, broad-bladed thing, double-edged and cross-hilted, meant for cutting, and it bore signs of wear. His engineer's eye recognized low-carbon steel. Nobody reproduced medieval equipment that accurately, even for a movie, let alone a parade; yet it was too large for the small man of the Middle Ages.

Papillon snorted and reared. Holger whirled around and saw the bear.

It was a big brown one, which had perhaps come ambling along to investigate the noise. It blinked sleepily at them, and Holger wished wildly he had his gun, then it turned and walked off again.

Holger leaned against Papillon's saddle till he got his wind back. "Now a brushwood forest," he heard himself saying earnestly, "is possible. There may be a few hawks left. But there are no, positively no bears in Denmark."

Unless one had escaped from a zoo — Now he was going hog-wild. What counted was learning the facts.

Was he crazy, or delirious, or dreaming? Not too likely. His mind was working pretty well by now. He sensed sunlight, leaves, the sharp mingled smells of horse and forest and his own sweat; it was all utterly prosaic. Anyway, there was nothing he could do but carry on, even in a dream. What he needed was some information and some food.

On second thought, he reversed the order of importance.

The stallion seemed friendly enough. He had no right to take him, but

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his case was probably more urgent than that of whatever owner had so carelessly left the animal here. In fact, being untied, the horse had probably strolled off.

Methodically, Holger re-packed the bundle and tied it back on. The stallion whinnied softly as he mounted, and walked over to the lance so he could pick it up. "Good boy," he said aloud. "I never thought horses were that smart." He fitted the butt of the weapon into a rest he found depending from the saddle, took the reins in his left hand, and clucked. Papillon started westward.

It wasn't till he had been riding for some time that Holger grew aware of his own unconscious skill. His experience with horses had been confined to some rather unhappy incidents at riding academies, and he recalled now having always said that a horse was only good for taking up space that might otherwise be occupied by another horse. Funny, the instant liking he'd felt for this black monster. And funnier, too, the easy way his body moved in the saddle, as if he'd done this all his life. When he thought about it, he grew awkward again, and Papillon snorted and shied; so he pushed it from his mind and concentrated on picking a way through the trees. It was a clumsy business, riding through pathless woods, especially if you were toting a lance.

The sun was low now, hidden by the black forms of trees, only a few bright slivers showing. Damn it, there just *wasn't* a wild stretch this big anywhere in the country. Had he somehow been carried unconscious to Russia? Or had the bullet thrown him into amnesia for weeks or months? No, that wouldn't do, his injury was fresh and he was wearing the same shirt and pants as last night, not much dirtier than they had been then. Then what in hell—?

He sighed. Worry was being replaced with thoughts of food. Let's see, about three broiled cod and a mug of Carlsberg Hof — No, let's be American and have a T-bone, smothered in French-fried onions, and —

Papillon reared, almost throwing him. Through the brush and the rising darkness, a lion was coming.

Holger yelled. The lion stopped, switching its tail, and rumbled in its maned throat. Papillon skittered around the beast, snorting. Holger grew aware that he had dropped the lance shaft into a horizontal rest and was pointing it forward.

Somewhere there was a noise that could only be a wolf-howl. The lion stood its ground, and Holger guided Papillon circling it and out of sight. He wanted to gallop, but a branch would surely sweep him off if he tried it in this murk. He was sweating.

Night came, and they stumbled through gloom. Holger's thoughts stead-

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ied themselves after a fashion. Bears and wolves and lions — That sounded like no place on earth, except maybe a remote district of India. But they didn't have European trees in India — did they? He tried to recall his Kipling, but a branch swatted him in the face and turned him to cursing.

"It looks," he said aloud, "as if we'll spend the night outdoors."

Papillon shoved on, a vague shadow in a darkness that muttered with voices. Holger heard owls, a remote screeching that might be a wildcat, more wolves. And something else — yes! A laughter, tittering low in the brush — "Who's there? Who is that?"

There was a patter of small feet running away, and the laughter faded. Holger shivered. It was getting cold.

Then he saw stars and realized they had emerged in a clearing. A yellow light glimmered ahead. A house? He urged Papillon ahead, and the stallion broke into a jarring trot.

When they got up to the house, Holger could see that it was of the most primitive sort, a rudely thatched cottage of wattled clay. Firelight was red on smoke rising from a hole in the roof, and gleamed out the little windows and around the sagging door. He paused, licking his lips, almost afraid to stop and make inquiries.

Well — it was chilly out. He decided it was wise to remain mounted, and thumped on the door with his lance butt.

It creaked open, and a bent figure stood black against the lighted interior. An old woman's voice, high and cracked, came to him: "Who is it? Who would stop with Mother Gerd?"

"A — stranger," said Holger slowly.

"Ah — Ah, yes. A fine young knight, I see, yes, yes. Come, fair sir, dismount ye and partake of what little a poor old woman can offer. Come, come, be not afeared. Shelter is all too rare, here by the edge of the world."

Holger peered beyond her into the shack. He couldn't see anyone else; it should be safe enough to stop off.

He was on the ground before he realized that she had been speaking in a language he did not know — and that he had answered her in the same tongue.

II

He sat at a rickety table, his eyes stinging with the smoke that curled under the rafters. One door led into a stable where his horse was now tied; otherwise there was only this low room. It held a few bits of rude furniture, a straw tick, a hearth on which the fire burned, a cat, and a disparately large and ornate wooden chest. The woman, Mother Gerd, was bent over the fire, stirring up a meal for him in an old iron pot. She was herself incredibly

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ancient, stooped and withered in a dress like a tattered sack, and gray hair straggled about a hook-nosed, sunken face that seemed caught forever in a snag-toothed grin. But her eyes were bright and black and very sharp.

"Ah, yes, yes," she said, "'tis not for the likes of me, poor old woman that I be, to inquire of that which strangers would keep hid. There are many who'd rather go a-secret, in these uneasy lands near the edge of the world, and for all I know ye might be some knight of Faerie itself in human guise, who'd put a spell on an impertinent tongue. Nonetheless, good sir, might I make bold to ask a name of ye? Not your own name, understand, if ye wish not to give it, but some name to address ye properly and with respect."

"I am Holger Carlsen," he answered absently.

She started, almost knocking over the pot. "Say ye so?"

"Why—" Was he wanted here? Was this German territory, or—He felt the dagger, which he had prudently thrust in his belt. "What is there about that name?"

"Oh—nothing, good sir—" Gerd looked away, then back to him. "Save that Holger and Carl are both somewhat well-known names, as ye well wot, though in sooth 'tis never been said that one was the son of the other, save in the sense that a king is—"

"I am neither of those," he said hastily, to stem the tide. "It's only chance, I imagine."

She dished up a bowl of stew for him, and he attacked it without stopping to worry about germs or poison. Bread and cheese went with it, hacked off by his knife and eaten with his fingers, and a mug of uncommonly good ale. It was a long time before Holger leaned back, sighed, and nodded satisfaction. "Thank you," he said. "It saved my life."

"'Tis naught, sire, 'tis but coarse fare for one such as ye, who must oft have supped with kings and belted earls, and listened to the minstrels of Provence, their glees and curious tricks, but though I be old and humble, yet would I do ye the honors which—"

"I marvel at your ale," said Holger quickly. "I'd not thought to find any so good, unless you—" He meant to say, "unless you bought it in some great city," but she interrupted him with a sly little laugh.

"Ah, good Sir Holger, for in truth 'tis a knight ye must be, I see ye're a man of wit and penetrating eye and must know all the poor old woman's tricks at your very fingertips. Yet though most of your order do frown on such cantrips and call 'em devices of the Devil, though in truth 'tis no different in principle from the wonder-working relics of some saint, that do their miracles alike for Christian or paynim, still must ye be aware that all here in this land do traffic in such little magics, and that 'twould scarce be justice to burn a poor old wife for witching herself up a little beer to com-

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fort her old bones of winter nights when there be such many and powerful sorcerers, open traffickers in black arts, who go unpunished, and —"

So you're a witch? thought Holger. *That I've got to see.* What did she think she was putting over on him, anyway? What kind of buildup was he getting?

He listened with half an ear while he puzzled over the matter of language. It was a strange tongue, an archaic-sounding French with a lot of Germanic words mixed in, one that he might have been able to unravel slowly but could surely never have spoken as if it were his native speech. Somehow, the transition to — wherever this was — had equipped him with the local dialect, and —

He had never gone in for reading romances, scientific or otherwise, but it began to seem more and more as if somehow, by some impossible process, he had fallen into the past. This house, and the old woman who took his knightly accoutrements as a matter of course, and the language, and the endless forest . . . But *where* was he? Not Denmark; they had never spoken this dialect there. Germany, France, Britain? . . . But if he was back in the Middle Ages, how account for the lion, or for this casual talk of living at the end of the world, on the boundaries of fairyland?

He thrust speculation aside. A few direct questions might help. "Mother Gerd," he said.

"Aye, good sir. With any service wherewith I can aid ye, honor falls on this poor and humble house." She stroked the big black cat, which watched the man with steady yellow eyes.

"Can you tell me what year this is?"

"Oh, now ye ask a strange question, good sir, and mayhap that wound on your poor head, which doubtless was won in dauntless battle with some monstrous troll or giant, has addled your memory; but in truth though I blush to say it, such reckonings have long slipped from me, and time is so uncanny a thing here in the wings of the world that —"

"Never mind. What land is this? What kingdom?"

"In sooth, fair knight, ye ask a question over which many scholars have cracked their heads and many warriors have cracked other men's heads. Hee, hee! For long have these marches been disputed between the sons of men and the sons of the Middle World, and wars and great sorcerous contests have raged for long and long, until now I can but say that Faerie and the Holy Empire both claim it while neither holds real sway; and it may be that the Saracens assert some title as well, forasmuch as their Mahound is said to have been a spirit himself. Eh, Grimalkin?" She scratched the cat's throat with a claw-like finger.

"Well —" Holger clung to his patience with both hands. "Where can I

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find men — Christian men, let us say — who will help me? Where is the nearest king or duke or earl or whatever he is?"

"There is a town not too many leagues away as men reckon distance," she said, "yet in all truth I must say that space, like time, is wondrously affected here by the sorceries blowing out of Faerie, so that betimes it seems near to where ye are bound, and then again it shrinks into great and tedious distance beset with perils, and the very land and way ye go remain not the same —"

Holger gave up. He knew when he was licked. Either this hag was a maundering idiot, or she was deliberately putting him off; in neither case could he hope to learn much.

"Yet if 'tis advice ye want," said Gerd suddenly, "though my own old head is oft woolly, as old heads are wont to be, and though Grimalkin here is dumb, yet 'tis possible counsel could be summoned for ye, and also that wherewith to allay your hurt and make ye whole again. Be not wroth if I proposed a little magic, for white it is — or gray, at least; were I a great witch, think ye I would dress in these rags and dwell in this hovel? Nay, 'twould be a palace all of gold for me, and servants on every hand would have welcomed ye. If by your leave I might summon a sprite, he could tell ye what ye would know better than I."

"Hm." Holger raised his brows. All right, that settled it. The old creature was nuts. Best to humor her if he intended to spend the night here. "If you wish, mother, then go right ahead."

"Now I perceive that ye come from strange places indeed," she said, "for most knights are forever calling on the Most High, though oft in great oaths that will cost them hellfire pangs, nor live they overly godly lives; yet must the Empire use what poor tools it can find in this base and wicked world. Such is not your manner, Sir Holger, and it makes me wonder if indeed ye are not a Faerie yourself. Yet shall we try this matter, though 'tis but fair to say that the sprites are uncanny beings and may give no answer, or one which means little."

She hobbled over to the chest and opened it. There was a curious tautness in her, and the cat never stopped watching Holger. He wondered what the hell she was up to, and there was a little crawling along his spine.

Out of the chest came a tripod and a brazier, which Gerd set up and filled with powder from a flask. She took out also a wand, which seemed to be of ebony and ivory, and drew a circle on the dirt floor around the tripod, muttering and making passes. Outside it, she drew a larger circle, and stood between the two of them with her cat.

"The inner device is to hold the demon, and the outer to stay what enchantments he might try to make, for they are often grumpy when sum-

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moned out of airiness so swift," she explained. "I must ask ye, Sir Knight, to make no prayer nor sign of the cross, for that would cause him to leave at once, and in most foul humor too." Her eyes glittered at him, and he wished he could read expression in that web of wrinkles.

"Go ahead," he said, a little thickly.

She began dancing around the inner circle, and he caught something of her chant. "*Amen, amen* —" Yes, he knew what was coming next. "— *malo a nos libera sed* —" He didn't know why it should raise his hackles. She finished the Latin and switched to a shrill language he did not recognize. When she touched her wand to the brazier, it began throwing out a heavy smoke that almost hid her but, curiously, did not reach beyond the outer circle. "*O Beliya'al, Ba'al Zebub, Abaddon, Ashmadai!*" Her voice was screaming now. "*Samiel, Samiel, Samiel!*"

The smoke was — thickening? Holger started forward, muttering a curse. He could barely see Gerd in that dense, firelit haze, but it was as if something else hovered over the tripod, something gray and snaky, half-transparent — By Heaven, he saw red eyes, and the thing had almost the shape of a man!

He heard it speak then, a whistling unhuman tone, and the old woman answered in the language he did not know. Ventriloquism, he told himself wildly, ventriloquism and his own mind, blurred with weariness, it was only that. Papillon snorted and stamped in his stall. Holger dropped a hand to his knife, the blade was hot. Did magic, he thought crazily, induce eddy currents?

The thing in the smoke piped and snarled and writhed about. It talked with Gerd for what seemed a very long time before she finally raised her wand and went into another chant. Then the smoke began to thin. It seemed as if it were being sucked back into the brazier. Holger swore shakily and reached for the ale.

When there was no more smoke, Gerd stepped out of the circle. Her face was completely blank, and the eyes that met his were hooded. But he saw that she was trembling. And the cat arched its back and spat at him.

"Strange rede," she said at last, tonelessly. "Strange rede the demon gave me."

"What — did he say?" whispered Holger.

"He said — Samiel said ye were from very far away, so far that a man might travel till Judgment Day and not reach your home. Is't not so?"

"Yes," said Holger slowly. "Yes, I think that's true."

"And he said help for your plight, the means for returning ye whence ye came, lies within Faerie itself. There must ye go, Sir — Holger. Ye must ride into Faerie, and they will help ye."

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Holger sat still, not knowing what to say.

"Oh, 'tis not so bad as it sounds." Gerd chuckled, returning to her old merriment. "If the truth must out, I am on not unfriendly terms with Duke Alfric, the nearest lord of Faerie. He is a strange sort, as all his breed are, but he'll help ye if ye ask it. And I shall also furnish a guide, so ye can go there with all haste."

"And why?" asked Holger. "I can't offer repayment."

"None is needed," said Gerd airily. "A good deed may be remembered to my credit when I depart this world for another and, I fear, warmer clime; and in any case, it pleasures an old woman to help a handsome young man. Ah, there was a time, very long ago —! But enough of that. Let me dress your hurt, and then off to bed with ye."

Holger submitted to having his injury washed, and a poultice of herbs bound over it with an incantation. He was getting too sleepy to deny anything. But he remembered enough caution to refuse her offer of her own mattress, and to move in and sleep on the hay next to Papillon. No use taking chances. This was an odd house, to say the least.

III

Waking, he lay for some time in a half-doze before remembering where he was. Then he sat up with a yell, sleep draining from him, and glared around.

A stable, yes! A crude earthen shelter, smelling of mold and manure and hay, with the huge black horse looming over him and nuzzling him tenderly. He climbed to his feet, picking straws out of his clothes and squinting through the vague light.

Sunshine poured in as Mother Gerd opened the door. "Ah, good morrow, fair sir," she cried cheerily. "In truth ye slept the sleep of the just, and I'd not the heart to waken ye. But come now and see what waits."

That proved to be a bowl of porridge, with more bread and cheese and ale, and a hunk of half-cooked bacon besides. Holger consumed it readily and, afterward, thought wistfully of coffee and a smoke. But wartime shortages had somewhat weaned him from those pleasant vices, and he settled for a vigorous washing from a trough outside the house.

When he came back inside, a newcomer was waiting. Holger didn't see him till a hand plucked at his trousers and a bass voice rumbled, "Here I be." Then, looking down, he saw a gnarly, earth-brown man with jutting ears, an outsize nose, and a white beard, clad in jacket and breeches of brown cloth and wearing wooden clogs. The man was not quite three feet tall.

"This is Hugi," said Mother Gerd. "He'll be your guide to Faerie."

"Ummm — Pleased to meet you," said Holger. He shook hands, which seemed to astonish the dwarf. Hugi's palm was hard and calloused.

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"Now be off with ye," cried the old woman gaily, "for the sun is long up and ye've a long way to go through realms most parlous. Yet fear not, Sir Holger; Hugi is of the woods-dwellers and will see ye safe to Duke Alfric." She handed him a cloth-wrapped bundle. "Herein have I laid some bread and meat and other refreshment, for well I know how impractick ye young paladins are, gallivanting about the world to rescue fair maidens with never a thought of taking along a bite of lunch. Ah, were I young again, 'twould not matter to me either, for what is an empty belly when all the world is green, but now I grow old and must think a bit."

"Thank you, my lady," said Holger awkwardly.

He turned to go, but Hugi pulled him back with surprising strength. "Wha's the thocht here?" he growled. "Would ye gang oot in bare cloth? There's a mickle long galoots oot in yon woods were glad to stick iron in a rich-clad knight."

"Oh — oh, yes." A little numbly, Holger began unwrapping his equipment. Mother Gerd tittered and went out the door.

The medieval clothes fitted him so well that he began to wonder. He put on narrow breeches and a tunic; bound thongs about his calves while he slipped his padded coat on. The armor clashed heavily as he drew it over his head, and hung with unexpected weight from his shoulders. Now, let's see — Obviously that broad belt went around the waist and carried his dagger, while the baldric supported his sword. Hugi handed him a quilted cap which he donned, followed by the conical iron helmet with its nose guard and crimson plume. Finally he buckled gilt spurs on his feet and a cloak at his throat and wondered whether he looked swashbuckling or merely silly.

"Now away, Sir Holger, and good speed to ye," said Mother Gerd as he came outside.

"I — I will remember you in my prayers," he said, thinking that would be an appropriate thanks in this land.

"Aye — do so, Sir Holger!" She turned from him with disquieting shrill laughter and vanished into the house.

Hugi gave his belt a hitch. "Come on, come on, ma knightly loon, let's na stay the day," he muttered. "Who fares to Faerie must ride a swift horse."

Holger mounted Papillon and gave Hugi a hand up. The little man hunkered down on the saddlebow and pointed eastward. "That way," he said. "'Tis a two-three days' ganging to Alfric's cot, so off we glump."

The horse fell into motion, and the house was soon lost behind them. They rode under tall trees, in a still green light that was full of rustlings and bird-calls. Holger sat listening for a while to the noises of the forest, and to

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the muted hoofbeats and the creak of leather and the jingle of iron.

He remembered his injury, for the first time since waking. There was no feeling up there. The fantastic medication seemed really to work.

But this whole thing was so fantastic that — He thrust the questions firmly back. One thing at a time. Somehow, unless he really was dreaming — and he doubted that more and more — he had fallen into a realm beyond his own time, perhaps beyond his whole world: a realm where they at least believed in witchcraft and fairies, and which certainly had one real enough dwarf. So take one thing at a time, go slow and easy.

It was hard to do. Not only his own situation, but the thought of home, the wondering what had happened there, the terrible fear that he might be caught here forever, grabbed at him. Sharply he remembered the green roofs of Copenhagen, the moors and beaches of Jutland, the fair dales of the island and the little ancient towns nestled in them, the spired arrogance of New York, friends and loves and the million small things that were home. He wanted to run away, run crying till he found home again, till he was safe in the sanity he knew — No, none of that now! He could only keep going. If this duke in Faerie (whatever *that* might be) could help him, there was still hope. It was, he supposed, a good thing that he wasn't too imaginative.

He looked down at the hairy little fellow riding with him. "It is kind of you to do this," he ventured. "I wish I could repay you somehow."

"Na, I do 't in the witch's service," said Hugi. "No that I'm boond to her, see ye. 'Tis but that noo and betimes some o' us woodsy folk help her, chop wood or fetch water or run errands like this. Then she does for us in return. I canna say I like th' old bat much, but she'll gi' me mickle a stoup o' her bra bricht witch-ale for this."

"Why, she seemed — nice."

"Oh, ah, she's with a smooth tongue when she wills, aye, aye." Hugi chuckled morbidly. "'Twas e'en so she flattered young Sir Magnus when he came riding, many and many a year ago. But she deals in black arts. She's no sa powerful, she can but summon a few small demons, but she's tricksy." The dwarf grinned. "I recall one time a peasant in the Westerdales did gi' her offense, and she swore she'd blight his crops for him. But he was rich and had many broad acres, o' which Mother Gerd, for all her sweating and striving, could blacken but a few. He cared naught; indeed, she killed off the thistles in that patch for him, and next year his corn flourished green there. She's ever trying to win favor wi' the Middle World lords, so that they'll grant her more power, but so far there's been little gain in 't."

"Ummm —" That didn't sound so good. "What happened to this Sir Magnus?" asked Holger.

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"Oh, at the last, crocodiles ate him, methinks."

They rode on for a while in silence. Finally Holger asked Hugi exactly what a woods dwarf did. Hugi said they lived in the forest — which, it seemed, was of enormous extent — off mushrooms and nuts and such, and had a working arrangement with the smaller animals like rabbits and squirrels. They had no inherent magical powers, such as the true Faerie dwellers did, but on the other hand they had no fear of iron or silver or holy symbols.

"We'll ha' naught to do wi' the wars in this uneasy land," said the dwarf. "We'll bide our ain lives, and let Heaven, Hell, Earth, and the Middle World fight it oot as they will, and when yon proud lairds ha' all laid each other oot, stiff and stark, we'll still be here. A pox on 'em all!" Holger got the impression that the little people rather resented the snubs they got from men and Middle Worlders alike.

He said slowly: "Now you've made me unsure. If Mother Gerd means no good, why should I follow her advice and go to Faerie?"

"Why indeed?" shrugged Hugi. "Only mind, I didna say she was alway evil. If she had no grudge against ye, she might well ha' decided to help ye in all truth. And Duke Alfric may help too, just for the fun in such a new riddle as ye seem to offer. Ye canna tell wha' the Faerie folk will do next. They canna tell theirselves, nor care. They live in wildness, which is why they are o' the dark Chaos side in this war."

That didn't help a bit. Faerie was the only hope he had been given of returning home, and yet the whole thing might be a trap — though why anyone should bother trapping a penniless stranger like himself —

"Hugi," he asked, "would you willingly lead me to my death?"

"Nay, seeing ye're na foe o' mine, indeed a good sort, no like some I could name." The dwarf spat. "I dinna know what Mother Gerd had in mind, nor care I overly much. Sith ye want to gang Faeriewards, I'll guide ye."

"And what happens then is no concern of yours, eh?"

"Richt. We little uns learn to mind our ain affairs."

There was bitterness in the foghorn bass. Holger reflected that it might be turned to his own ends. He wasn't altogether a stranger to people with overcompensated inferiority complexes. And surely Hugi could give more help than just guiding him into he knew not what.

"I'm getting thirsty," he said. "Shall we stop for a short snort?"

"A short what?" Hugi wrinkled his leathery face.

"Snort. You know — a drink."

"Snort — drink — Haw, haw, haw!" Hugi slapped his thigh. "A guid twist, 'tis. A short snort. I maun remember 't, to use i' the woodsy burrows. A short snort!"

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"Well, how about it? I thought I heard a bottle clink in that package we got."

Hugi smacked his lips. They reined in and unrolled the witch's bundle. Yes, a couple of clay flasks. Holger offered Hugi the first pull, which seemed to surprise the dwarf. But he took good advantage of it, his Adam's apple fluttering blissfully under the snowy beard, then belched and handed the bottle over.

He seemed puzzled when they rode on. "Ye've unco manners, Sir Holger," he said. "Ye canna be a knight o' the Empire, nor even a Saracen."

"No," said Holger, "I'm from very far away. Where I come from, we reckon one man as good as the next."

The little eyes regarded him from beneath shaggy brows. "An eldritch notion," said Hugi at last. "Hoo'll ye steer the realm if commons may sit to sup wi' the gentle?"

"We manage. Everybody has a voice in the government."

"But that canna be! 'Tis but a great babble then, and naught done."

"We tried the other way for a long time, but kings were so often weak and foolish we thought we could hardly be worse off."

"Hum, hum, 'tis vurra strange talk, though in truth — Why, it makes me think ye must be o' the Chaos forces yeselves."

"What do you mean?" asked Holger respectfully. "I know nothing of this land. Could you tell me something?"

He let the dwarf growl on for a long time without learning much. Hugi wasn't very bright, and a backwoodsman to boot. Holger got the impression that there was a perpetual struggle between primeval forces of Law and Chaos. Humans, except for occasional witches and such-like, were, consciously or unconsciously, on the side of Law; the Middle World, which seemed to include such realms as Faerie, Trollheim, and the Giants, was with Chaos — was, indeed, a creation thereof. Wars among men, like that now being waged between the Saracens and the Holy Empire, were due to Chaos; under Law, all men would live in peace and order, but this was so alien to the Middle Worlders that they were forever working and scheming to prevent it and to extend their own shadowy dominion.

It sounded to Holger like the vague recollections he had of the old Persian religion; indeed this whole tale might well be purely religious or superstitious. He was more interested in the practical politics of this world, though Hugi wasn't much help there either. He gathered that the lands of men, where Law was pretty firmly established, lay in the west: the major divisions of them seemed to be the Holy Empire of the Christians and the Saracen kingdoms south of it. The present reach of the Middle World started somewhere east of here, with Faerie closest to the realms of mankind. This im-

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mediate section was a disputed march where anything could happen.

"In olden time," said Hugi, "there were all Chaos, see ye, but step by step 'tis been driven back. The greatest step was, as all know, when the Savior lived, for then naught o' darkness could stand, and great Pan himsel' died. But noo, 'tis said, Chaos has rallied and is ready to strike back. I dinna know."

Hm. There was no chance just now to separate fact and fancy. But this world paralleled Holger's own in so many ways that there *must* be a connection. Could it be that contact had been made from time to time, throughout the ages, and that the creatures of his world's myth had a real existence here? Remembering some of those beings, Holger hoped not. He didn't especially care to meet a fire-breathing dragon or a three-headed giant, interesting as they might be from a zoological standpoint.

Still — it was all so damnably *real!*

"Oh, by the way," said Hugi, "ye'll want t' leave yer crucifix and iron at the gates, nor may ye speak holy words inside. The Faerie folk canna stand against such, but if ye use 'em they'll find ways to send ye ill luck and ruin."

Holger wondered what the status of an agnostic was here. He had been brought up a Lutheran, but hadn't been inside a church for years. If this thing had to happen to somebody, it might have been safest for a good Catholic.

Hugi talked on. And on. And on. Holger tried to pay friendly attention, without overdoing it. Finally they got to telling stories, and he dug out all the off-color jokes he could remember. Hugi whooped.

They had stopped by a moss-banked stream for lunch when the dwarf suddenly leaned forward and put a hand on Holger's arm. "Sir Knight," he said, looking at the ground, "I'd do ye a good turn if ye wish."

Holger restrained a shiver. "I could use one, thanks," he said with a hard-held steadiness.

"I dinna know wha' the best coorse be for ye. Mayhap 'tis to ride to Faerie e'en as the witch said, mayhap 'tis to turn tail richt noo. Nor have I any way to find oot. But there's one I ken in the woods, a friend to all its dwellers, who'd know any news in the forest and could belike gi' ye a rede."

"If I could see him it would be a big help."

"'Tis no a him, 'tis a her. I'd no take any other knight to her, for they're all a lustful sort and she likes 'em little; but ye — well — I canna be an evil guide to ye."

"Thank you, friend. If I can ever do you a service —"

"'Tis naught," growled Hugi. "'Tis for ma ain honor I do 't. And watch yer manners wi' her, ye clumsy loon!"

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IV

It was several hours' ride to the place they were seeking. Hugi spent most of the time talking about his exploits among the females of his species; Holger listened with one ear, pretending an awe which was certainly deserved if half the yarns were true. Mostly, though, he was lost in his own thoughts.

They were entering higher country, though Papillon seemed tireless. The forest was becoming more open, with broad meadows full of wild flowers and sunlight, gray lichenous boulders strewn between clumps of windy trees, now and then a wide view across hills rolling into purple distance. There were many streams here, hurrying down into the lower dales, leaping and flashing over green bluffs with rainbows caught in their foam. And there was much life: kingfishers like small blue thunderbolts, remotely hovering hawks and eagles, wild geese rising loud from the edge of some reedy upland mere, a swiftly glimpsed rabbit or deer or bear. Overhead the sky was utterly blue, tall white clouds sweeping their shadows across the murmurous land, and the wind was fresh and cool in Holger's face. He found himself rather enjoying the trip. Even the armor, which had dragged so heavily on him at first, was becoming like a part of him. And in some dim way, there was a — homeness — about this scene, as if he had known it once long before.

He tried to chase down that memory. Had it been in the Alps, or in Norway's high *sætere*, or the mountain meadows around Rainier? No, it was more than just similarity. Almost, he *knew* these marches of Faerie. But the remembrance dodged back into the darkness of his mind, and he dismissed it as just another case of *déjà vu*.

Though if his transition here had taught him a new language, it was not unlikely it would have played other tricks with his brain. For a moment he had a wild idea that perhaps his mind had been transferred to another body. Then he looked down at his big golden-haired hands, and reached up to touch the familiar dent in the bridge of his nose. No, he was still himself. And, incidentally, he was rather badly in need of a shave.

The sun was low when they crossed a final meadow and halted under trees on the shore of a lake. The water was broad, a sheet of sun-fire a mile across, fringed with rushes; a flock of wild ducks rose noisily at their approach. "We can wait here," said Hugi. He slid nimbly to the grass and rubbed his buttocks, grimacing. "Oof, ma poor old backside!"

Holger dismounted as well, feeling a certain soreness himself. No reason to tether the dog-like Papillon; he looped the bridle up, and the stallion began contentedly cropping. "She'll be here soon, belike," rumbled Hugi.

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"'Tis her ain nest hereaboots. But while we wait, laddie, we could be refreshing ourselves."

Holger took the hint and broke out the ale. "You still haven't told me who 'she' is," he said.

"'Tis Alianora, the swan-may." Beer gurgled down the dwarf's throat. "Hither and yon she flits, throughout the wood and e'en into the Middle World betimes, and the folk tell her o' gossip. For she's a dear friend unto all o' us. Aaaaah! Old Mother Gerd, a witch she may be, but a brewmistress beyond compare!"

Papillon whinnied and reared. Turning, Holger saw a long form of spotted gold sliding down toward the lake. A leopard! His sword was out and aloft before he knew it.

"Nay, nay, hold." Hugi tried to grab his arm, couldn't reach far enough, and settled for his legs. "He comes in peace. He'll no set on ye unless ye offer ill to the swan-may."

The leopard flowed gracefully to a halt, sat down, and watched them with cool amber eyes. Holger sheathed his blade again, feeling sweat prickle on his skin. Just when these wilds were becoming familiar and understandable, something like this had to happen.

Wings beat overhead. "'Tis she!" cried Hugi. He jumped up and down, waving his arms. "Hallo, there, hallo, come on down!"

The swan fluttered to a halt a yard away. It was the biggest one Holger had ever seen. The evening light burned gold on its whiteness. He took an awkward step forward, wondering how you introduced yourself to a swan, and the bird flapped its wings and backed up.

"Nay, nay, be naught afeared, Alianora." Hugi darted forward. "He's a bra guid sire who'd but have speech wi' ye."

The swan stopped, poised a moment, and then spread its wings wide and stood on tiptoe. Its body lengthened, the neck shrank, the wings narrowed — "*Jesus Kriste!*" yelled Holger and crossed himself. It was a woman who stood there.

No — a girl. She couldn't be over eighteen: a tall slender young shape, lithe and sun-browned, with coppery-brown hair flowing over her shoulders, huge gray eyes, a few freckles across a pert snub nose, a wide gentle mouth — why, she was beautiful! Almost without thought, Holger slipped his chin strap free and doffed helmet and cap and bowed to her.

She approached shyly, fluttering long sooty lashes. She wore only a brief sleeveless tunic that seemed to be woven of white feathers, and her bare feet were small and soundless in the grass. "So 'tis ye, Hugi," she said, with more than a hint of the dwarf's burr in her soft tones. "Welcome. And ye, Sir Knight, sith ye be friend to my friend."

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The leopard crouched, switching its tail and looking suspiciously at Holger. Alianora smiled and went over and chucked it under the chin. It rubbed against her legs, purring like a Diesel engine.

"This long lad hight Sir Holger," said Hugi importantly. "And as ye see, yon be the swan-may hersel'. Shall we sup?"

"Why —" Holger sought for words. "It is a pleasure to meet you, my lady." He was careful to use the formal pronoun; she was timid of him, and that leopard was still watching. "I hope we haven't disturbed you."

"Och, nay," she said. Then, smiling and seeming to relax: "Nay, no at all. The pleasure be mine. I see so few new folk, sairly gallant knights." There was no particular coquetry in her tone, she was just trying to match his own courtliness.

"Ah, let's eat," growled Hugi. "Ma belly's a-scraping o' ma backbone."

They sat down by the lake. Alianora ripped the tough dark bread with her teeth as easily as the dwarf. Little was said until they had finished, when the sun was on the horizon and shadows very long. Then Alianora looked directly at Holger and said: "There be a man hunting for ye, Sir Knight. A Saracen. Is he friend o' yours?"

"A *Saracen*?" Holger pulled his jaw up with a click. "I am a — stranger. I don't know anyone here. There must be some mistake."

"Mayhap there is," said Alianora cautiously. "What brocht ye here unto me, though?"

Holger explained his difficulty. The girl frowned, a tiny crease between level brows. "Now that I fear I canna tell," she murmured. "But ye move in darksome company, Sir Knight. Mother Gerd is not a good soul, and all know how tricky Duke Alfric be."

"So you think I'd best not go to him?"

"I canna say." She looked distressed. "I know naught o' the high ones in Faerie. I only ken a few o' the lesser folk in the Middle World, some kobolds and nixies, a werewolf or two, and the like."

Holger blinked. There it went again. No sooner had he begun to believe he was sane, than off they were, speaking of the supernatural as if it were part of everyday.

Well — maybe it was, here. Damn it, he'd just seen a swan turn into a woman. Illusion or not, he didn't think it was anything which could have happened in his own world.

The initial shock and its inward numbness was wearing off. He was beginning to realize, with his whole being, how far he was from home, how far and how alone. He clenched his fists together, trying not to curse or cry.

Remembrance. "What," he asked slowly, "was it you said about a Saracen looking for me?"

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"Oh, him." The girl looked out across the twilit glimmer of the lake. "I've no seen him mysel', but the woods be full o' the tale, moles mumble it in their burrows and the badgers talk o' 't to the otters, and then the kingfisher and the crow get the word and cry it to all. It seems that for many weeks, now, a lone warrior, who must by his looks be a Saracen, has been riding about in these marches inquiring after a Christian knight he believes to be in these parts. He's no said why he wanted the man, but the looks o' him, as the Saracen tells 'em, are yours: a blond giant riding a black horse, and bearing arms o' —" She glanced toward Papillon. "Nay, your shield is covered now. The arms he speaks o' be three hearts and three lions."

Holger stiffened. "I don't know any Saracens," he said thinly. "I don't know anyone here. I come from further away than you know."

"An enemy o' yers, seeking ye oot to slay?" asked Hugi interestedly. "Or a friend, e'en?"

"I tell you I don't know him!" Holger realized he was shouting. "Pardon me. I feel all at sea."

Alianora widened her eyes. "All at sea —? Oh, aye." Her chuckle was a sweet sound. "A pretty phrase."

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Holger recorded the fact for future use that all the clichés of his world seemed to pass for new-coined wit here. But mostly he was busy thinking about this Saracen. Who the devil — The only Moslem he'd ever known had been that timid, bespectacled little Syrian at college: about as unknightly a character as you could find.

He must have made off with the horse and equipment of a man who, coincidentally, resembled him. That could mean real trouble later on. No point in seeking out the Moslem warrior — most certainly not!

A nihilistic mood of despair washed over him. "I'll go to Faerie," he said. "It seems to be my only chance."

"And a chancy place it is for mortals," said Alianora gravely. She leaned forward. "Which side be ye on? Law or Chaos?"

Holger hesitated. "Ha' no fear," she urged. "Here is peace for all beings."

"Law, I guess," he said slowly, "though I really know nothing of this wor — this land."

"I thocht so," said Alianora. "Well, I'm human too, and even if the minions o' Law be often guzzling brutes, I think still I like their side better than Chaos. So I'll gang along wi' ye. It may be I can give some help in the Middle World."

Holger started to protest, but she raised a slender hand. "Nay, nay, speak no of 't. 'Tis small risk for me who can fly, and —" She laughed gaily. "And it could be a richt merry adventure, methinks!"

Night was coming, with stars and dew. Holger spread a blanket to sleep

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on, while Alianora went off saying she'd rather house in a tree. The man lay awake for a long time, watching the constellations. They were all familiar, it was the summer sky of northern Europe up there. But how far was it to home? Or did distance have any meaning?

He recalled that when Alianora had changed into the human form, he had unthinkingly crossed himself, something he'd never done before in his life. Was it just the effect of this medieval environment, or was it part of the unconscious skills, language and riding and Lord knew what else, he had somehow gained? It was lonely, not even knowing yourself.

There were no mosquitoes here. For small blessings give praises. But he might have welcomed one, as a reminder of home.

Finally he slept.

V

They set out in the morning, Holger and Hugi on Papillon, Alianora flying overhead in the swan shape, curving and soaring and vanishing behind the trees to reappear again. The man's spirits rose with the day; at least he was bound somewhere, and he seemed to be in good company. By noon they were high in the hills, a rough and windy land of great boulders, long harsh grass and gnarled copses, rushing waterfalls and deep shadowy ravines. It seemed to Holger that the eastern horizon was darker than it should be.

Hugi broke into tuneless and bawdy song. Holger, to match him, rendered such ballads as *The Jolly Tinker* and *The Bastard King of England*, translating with an ease that surprised himself. The dwarf guffawed till echoes rang around them. Holger was halfway through *Les Trois Orfèvres* when a shadow fell on him. Looking up, he saw that the swan was hovering overhead, listening with great interest. He choked.

"Eh, do go on, laddie," urged Hugi. "'Tis a rare bouncy song."

"I can't remember the rest," said Holger weakly.

He dreaded facing Alianora when they stopped for lunch. That was by a small thicket shielding a cave mouth. The girl came lightly toward him in human form, smiling. "Ye've a tuneful way with ye, Sir Holger," she said.

"Um, yes, thank you," he muttered, looking away.

"I would ye could recollect wha' happened to the three goldsmiths," she said. "'Twas rude to leave them there on the rooftop."

He stole a look at her, but the gray eyes were wholly candid. Well, if she'd spent her life among the earthy little people — Still, he didn't have the nerve. "I'll try to remember," he said falsely.

The brush rustled dryly behind them. Turning, Holger saw a creature emerge from the cave. At first he thought it was deformed, then he decided it must be a normal non-human development. The fellow stood

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a little taller than Hugi and much broader, with knotty arms hanging to his bent knees; the head was big and round, flat-nosed, with pointed ears and an enormous mouth; the skin was pale gray, and completely hairless. "Why, 'tis Unrich," cried Alianora. "I thocht no ye denned this high in the hills."

"Oh, Ay git aroon, Ay do." The being hunkered down and regarded Holger with round eyes that were all black, no white about them. He wore only a leather apron, and there was a small hammer in his hand. "We-un bin a drayvin' a new shaft thisaboots." He waved at the stony landscape. "That's gold in them thar hills."

"Unrich belongs wi' the nickels," said Alianora. The engineer decided that must be a tribe of mountain dwarfs rather than a series of alloys.

The newcomer was as avid for gossip as everyone here seemed to be. Holger's tale had to be gone through all over again. At the end, the nickel shook his head and spat thoughtfully. "'Tis naw so canny a steading ye're boon fawr," he muttered. "An' roight noo, too, when the Middle World is marshalin' all uns hosts."

"Aye," said Hugi, "'tis a cold welcome we micht get at Alfric's."

"They do say elves an' trolls ha' made allayance," said Unrich. "An' when them thar clans get together, 'tis suthin' big afoot."

Alianora frowned. "I like it little," she said to Holger. "Sorceries go ever more boldly abroad, even into the Empire, I hear. 'Tis as if a bulwark o' Law has been taken away, so that Chaos can freely muster to overthrow all."

"Thar wuz a holy spell put on Cortana, but noo 'tis berried away fro' soight o' man," said Unrich with a certain morbid relish.

Cortana — Where had he heard that name before?

Unrich reached in a pocket of his apron and, much to Holger's surprise, drew out a stubby clay pipe and a sack of something that looked like tobacco. Striking fire with flint, he inhaled contentedly. The man looked wistfully at him.

"That's a trollish trick, yon fire-breathing," said Hugi.

"Ay loike un," said Unrich stubbornly.

"And quite rightly, too," said Holger. " 'A woman is only a woman, but a good Cigar is a Smoke.' "

They stared at him. "I ne'er heard o' mankind playing dragon thus," said Alianora.

"Lend me a pipe," said Holger, "and watch!"

"This is too guid to miss!" Unrich ducked back in his cave and returned presently with a crudely carved briar. Holger tamped, got a light, and blew happy clouds. He didn't think it was tobacco he was smoking, it was strong as the very devil, but no worse than stuff he'd had in France. Hugi and Unrich goggled at him, but Alianora went into peals of laughter.

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"How much you want for this?" asked Holger. "I'll swap you a spare cloak for the pipe and a sack of toba — of smoking-leaf."

"Done!" said Unrich at once. Holger realized he could have made a better bargain. Oh, well.

"Ye could at least throw in some food for us," said Alianora.

"Wull, sith 'tis yew what ask it." Unrich disappeared again. Alianora looked at Holger and sighed. "Ye men are scarce a practick breed," she said commiseratingly.

With a load of bread, cheese, and smoked meat, they set off again. The country grew ever steeper and wilder, and the darkness in the east rose like a vague wall before them. Near evening, they halted at what must be the crest of the range; below them, the hills swooped down toward a gloominess of pine woods. Alianora set deftly to work building a lean-to of plaited withes, while Hugi got fire and supper going and Holger sat feeling rather useless. But it was pleasant to watch the girl moving about.

"Tomorrow," she said, as they sat around the fire, "we'll enter Faerie. After that, 'tis in the hands o' fate."

"Why is it so dark there?" asked Holger.

Alianora stared at him. "Truly ye're from afar off, or else a spell is on ye," she said. "All folk know that the Pharisees canna endure broad daylight, so 'tis forever twilit in their realm." She shuddered a little. The firelight etched her young face redly against a wind-whining darkness. "If Chaos wins, it may be yon twilight will be laid on all the world, and no more o' bricht sunshine and green leaves and flowers," she murmured. "Aye, I suppose indeed I am with Law." She paused. "And yet does Faerie have an eldritch loveliness about it. Ye'll see for yoursel'."

Holger looked across the blaze at her. The light shone in her eyes and stroked her hair and wove a mantle of shadow for her. "If I am not being rude," he said slowly, "it seems strange that a pretty young girl like you should live in the woods among — well — among others than your own kind."

"Oh, 'tis no hard riddle." She stared into the coals, and he could barely hear her voice above the whimpering wind. "I was found by the dwarfs as a babe lying in the woods. Belike I'd been stolen in some o' the harrying and burning which ever goes through the marches, and then the robbers wearied and left me. So the little folk raised me up. They be good, and they taught me much. Finally they gave me the swan-dress and let me live as I wished. But now I canna care mickle for the smoky halls o' men. I would have space and sky, see ye. That is the whole on 't."

Holger nodded, slowly.

She looked up at him. "But ye've told us little o' yoursel'," she said with

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an unsteady smile. "Where, indeed, be ye from, and how came ye hither without traversing lands o' men or Middle World and learning wha' they were?"

"I wish I knew," said Holger disconsolately.

It was on his tongue to tell her the whole story, but he thrust the impulse back. She probably wouldn't understand any of it; and besides, it might be well to have some secrets in reserve. "I think it was a spell laid on me," he said at last. "I lived somewhere so far off that we'd never heard of — anything you know here. Then suddenly, here I was."

"What micht your realm be called?" she insisted.

"Denmark," he blurted, and swore at himself when she exclaimed:

"But I've heard o' yon kingdom! 'Tis north o' the Empire, but a Christian country."

"Umm — well — it cannot be the same Denmark, then." *No, hardly!* "Mine lies in — ah — in a land called America."

"As ye will." She looked shrewdly at him. "Though methinks ye're hiding summat. Well, let it go. We on the marches learn not to be overly curious." She yawned. "Shall we to bed?"

They huddled together in the lean-to, close for warmth as the night grew colder. Holger wakened now and then, shivering, and heard Alianora breathing by his side. She was a sweet kid. If he never found his way back . . .

VI

Their descent was rapid next morning, though precarious. Hugi often yelped as Papillon's hoofs slipped on grinding talus and they teetered over a blowing edge of infinity. Alianora hovered far overhead, swooping and soaring. She had a hair-raising sport of turning human in mid-air and going back to swan shape just in time to break her fall. After watching her for a while, Holger needed a smoke pretty badly, to steady him. He couldn't light the pipe, finally Hugi had to help him with the flint and steel. Damn it all, why couldn't they have matches in this world?

The twilight hovered overhead like storm-clouds as they went through the pine woods. It deepened with every muffled step, until Holger wondered whether they would be able to see. His spine crawled at the thought of groping blind through a country of trolls and werewolves and God knew what else.

It grew warmer as they descended, until they were in a rolling valley where the air was a balm scented with the smell of flowers — pungent, incense-like odors he had never known before. The pines faded out and they rode over open country. Hugi looked nervous. "Noo be we well into Faerie," he muttered, "but hoo well we gang oot ag'in is another yarn."

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Holger's eyes turned about, sweeping the landscape. There was no source of light, but he could see clearly enough. The sky was a deep dusky blue, and the same cool blueness pervaded the air, as if he rode under water. There was long soft grass, with a curious silvery hue overlaying its pale green, and white flowers grew thickly. *Asphodels*, he thought, and wondered how he knew. Here and there were bushes of white roses that seemed to grow wild. Trees stood alone and in groups, tall slender ones with silver-like bark and leaves the color of the grasses; the slow wind blew through them with a tiny ringing sound. A wandering stream sang like crystal, and phosphorescence eddied white and green and blue over its running surface. It was hard to gauge distances in this tricky, shadowless light. Papillon snorted and trembled, ever so faintly. He didn't like it.

But where have I seen this before, just this cool calm blue over pale trees and strange far hills, where else has the wind blown thus singingly and the river chimed like bells of glass? Was it in a dream once long ago, half sleeping and half waking in the light summer night of Denmark, or was it in a time older and deeper and forgotten? I do not know. I do not think I wish to know.

They rode on. In that unchanging muted radiance, time seemed also a fluid, unstable thing, so that they might have been riding for a minute or a century, but the dimly glowing land slipped past them and still they rode. Until the swan far overhead came rushing down again and landed with a thunder of wings and became Alianora.

There was fear on her face. "I see a knight coming," she said. "A knight o' Faerie riding hither, and what he will I dinna know."

"Well —" Holger felt his heart begin a heavy thumping, but he held his face and tone steady. "Well, we'll find out."

The stranger came over the crest of a hill. He was riding a tall and slender horse, milk-white, with flowing mane and proudly arched neck. He was all in plate armor, his vizor down so that he had no face; white plumes nodded on the helmet, and his shield was blank and black, but the rest of his armor was a shimmering midnight blue. He halted and Holger rode toward him.

When the Dane was close, the stranger lowered his lance. "Stand and declare yourself!" His voice had a ringing, metallic quality; it was not a human voice.

Holger reined in, Papillon whickered on a defiant note. "I come from the witch Mother Gerd, with a message for Duke Alfric."

"But let me see your shield." The voice was a bell of brass. "Hither come no strangers."

"I — " Holger reached down, unbuckled the shield where it hung, and slipped it on his left arm. Reaching around his own lance, he took off the cover. "Here it is."

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The Faerie knight paused a moment. Then the lance swept down into its rest and he spurred the white horse.

"Defend yersel'!" shrieked Hugi, tumbling off the saddle. "He's after yer life!"

Papillon sprang aside while Holger was still gaping, and the knight rushed past with a soft thundering of hooves. Wheeling, he came back, the spearhead aimed for Holger's face.

Blind reflex, then. Holger lowered his own lance, kicked Papillon, and lifted the shield to guard himself. The black stallion sprang forward. The other knight was looming terribly close. His lance dipped, pointing for Holger's midriff. The Dane brought his own shield down, aimed his shaft, and braced feet in stirrups.

They hit with a bang that woke a million echoes. Holger's shield was jarred back against his stomach, and his lance almost tore free as it caught that vizor. The other shaft splintered, and the Faerie warrior lurched in the saddle. Papillon reared and surged a step ahead. The stranger went over his horse's crupper.

He was on his feet at once, incredible that he could do it in full armor, and his sword hissed free. There was still no time to think. Holger had to let his body act for him, it knew what to do. He hewed down at the dismounted enemy, sword meeting sword and showering sparks. The opponent hacked at Holger's leg, the Dane turned the blow just in time. He himself brought blade crashing down on the plumed helmet. It rang aloud, and the Faerie knight staggered.

Too awkward, striking from above. Holger leaped to the ground. His foot caught in a stirrup and he went flat on his back. The stranger sprang at him. Holger kicked with both feet. Again that brazen roaring, and the warrior fell. Both scrambled up. The newcomer's blade belled on Holger's helmet. Holger cut at the neck, trying to find an open joint in the plates. The Faerie knight chopped low, seeking his legs. Holger skipped back. The other rushed at him, sword blurring. Holger met the blow in midair. It shocked in his own muscles, but the other weapon went spinning free. At once the stranger pulled out a knife and leaped close.

The broadsword wasn't meant for thrusting, but Holger saw a crack above the gorget before him and stabbed in. Sparks leaped and crackled. The Faerie knight reeled, sank to his knees, and then fell suddenly to the grass and was still.

Looking about him, dizzily and with a roaring in his ears, Holger saw the white horse fleeing eastward. *Off to tell the Duke*, he thought wildly. Then Hugi was dancing and ki-yiing around him, and Alianora clung to his arm and sobbed and gasped how wonderfully he had fought.

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I? he thought slowly. *No, it wasn't I. I don't know a thing about swords and lances and horsemanship.*

But who, then, was it?

Alianora bent over the fallen knight. "He's no bleeding," she said huskily. "Yet belike he is slain, for the Pharisees canna endure touch o' cold iron."

Holger shook his head and breathed hard. Things were clearing for him, a little. He began to see some mistakes he'd made in the battle, it'd have been better to stay mounted after all. Briefly, he wondered what the Faerie dwellers — or Pharisees, as they seemed to be called — used in place of steel. Aluminum alloys? Those would serve, and surely magic could extract aluminum from bauxite —

He chuckled wryly. The concept was funny enough to restore a balance in him. "Well," he said, "let's see what we've got."

Stooping, he opened the vizor. Hollowness gaped at him. The armor was empty. It must have been empty all the time.

VII

Faerie seemed wholly wild, all hill and forest and open river valleys. Holger asked a much-subdued Hugi what the dwellers lived on. It turned out that they magicked up some of their food and drink, and got some from other realms in the Middle World tributary to them, and hunted some of it in the outlandish beasts that prowled their domain. All of them seemed to be warriors and sorcerers, though Hugi said they had taken slaves from among the goblins, kobolds, and other half-savage tribes. Further questions revealed that the Pharisees knew no age or illness, though it was said they lacked souls. It was a disquieting race to be up against.

Trying to find firm mental ground and forget that hollow armor lying in the field of asphodels, Holger began to theorize. He had only a fair knowledge of physics and mathematics, but he should be able to make some intelligent guesses. Damn it, there *had* to be a rationale in this world!

There were too many similarities for it to be altogether separate from his; this was surely not another planet in space. The ordinary laws of nature seemed to obtain, gravity and so on. But here they apparently had special clauses in them permitting, well, magic. And magic might well be no more than the direct mental control of matter. Even on Earth, his Earth, there were people who thought that possible, telekinesis and the rest. In this world, the mentally controllable forces seemed to be stronger than inorganic ones. . . .

He had gotten that far when he realized that he had gotten nowhere at all, merely given a different name to the same set of phenomena.

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Well, be that as it may, *where* was he? Or should he ask *when* was he? Another Earth, linked to his in some unknown manner — another plane of existence? It might be possible for two objects to occupy the same space and time without being aware of each other. Most likely this was a wholly different universe, one which closely paralleled his own but had its differences. That raised the question of just how many such universes there were.

He sighed and gave up. First things first. Right now he had to keep alive in a land where a lot of beings seemed to have it in for one who bore three hearts and three lions.

The castle grew slowly out of twilight. It was a high-walled place, all peaks and angles and soaring narrow towers, dizzily tall, but it had a wild kind of beauty. Its stone seemed like lace, so airy that a breath would dissolve it, but as he approached he saw just how massive those walls were. It stood not far from a low rounded hill covered with roses and streamers of mist. Hugi pointed. "Yon's Elf Hill," he said. "In there do the elves hold their unco revels, and come oot to dance o' moonlit nichts." Surrounding the castle on two sides and stretching north and west and east was a huge and gloomy forest. Holger's eyes went back to the fortress itself.

A trumpet sounded, far and cold like rushing water. *Now they've seen us,* he thought, and dropped a hand to his sword. Alianora fluttered down to turn human beside him. Her face was grave.

"You and Hugi —" He cleared his throat. "You've guided me here, and I thank you a thousand times. But now perhaps you'd best go."

She looked up at him. "Nay," she said after a moment, "I think we'll stay a bit. Mayhap we can help ye."

"I'm only a stranger," he faltered. "You owe me nothing, while I owe you everything."

The gray eyes remained serious. "Methinks ye're summat more than a stranger, e'en if ye dinna ken it yoursel'," she murmured. "I've a feeling about ye, Sir Holger. So I, at least, will stay."

"Well," puffed Hugi, though not very happily, "ye didna think I'd turn caitiff noo, did ye?"

Holger sighed. He'd done his duty by them, offering them a chance to leave — and God, was he glad they hadn't taken it!

The castle gates opened noiselessly, trumpets blew again, and a troop came riding out with banners and scutcheons to meet him. As they neared, he reined in and waited, his hand tight around the lance.

So these were the lords of Faerie.

They were richly clad, in brilliant colors that seemed luminous against the twilight, crimson and gold and purple and green. Some were armored in

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chain mail or plate, silvery stuff elaborately shaped and chased, others wore only their prideful robes. They were a tall people, moving with a soundless liquid grace no human could rival, and the haughtiness of rulers was stamped on cold, thinly chiseled features. There was a strange cast of face to all of them, high tilted cheekbones, winged nostrils, narrow chin; the skin was white, the long fine hair blue-silver, with most of the men beardless. When they got close enough, Holger thought at first they were blind, for the great oblique eyes held only an azure blankness, but he soon realized their vision was better than his.

The leader halted and bowed a little in his seat. "Welcome, Sir Knight," he said. His voice was a beautiful thing to hear, low and singing. "I hight Alfric, Duke of Alfarland in the Kingdom of Faerie. 'Tis not oft we see mortal man come to visit us."

"Thank you, my lord." The courtly phrases fell of themselves from Holger's lips. "The witch Mother Gerd, whom I believe a humble servant of yours, commended me to you. She thought belike your wisdom could solve a grief of mine, so hither I came to beg the favor."

"Ah, so. Be welcome, then, you and your servitors. I bid you be my guests for as long as it pleasures you, and shall strive to aid a gentleman of your standing with all my power."

My standing? Holger reflected that the thing which had attacked him was almost certainly a creature of the Duke's. Three hearts and three lions just weren't popular in the Middle World, it seemed. The question was, did the Duke know now that Holger wasn't the man he'd wanted to have killed? And whether he knew it or not, what plans were behind that smooth chill face?

"I thank you, my gracious lord," he said aloud.

"It pains me that I must bid you leave cross and iron outside, but you know the weakness of our folk," said Alfric urbanely. "Fear not, you shall be given weapons of our own make."

"In your stronghold, my lord, there is nothing to fear," said Holger and thought what a liar he was becoming.

Alianora stirred uneasily. "I'll watch your stuff, Holger," she said. "I'd liefer stay outdoors anyway."

Alfric and the other Pharisees bent their wide blank eyes on her. "'Tis the swan-may of whom we have so oft heard," murmured the Duke. "Nay, fair lady, you've naught to fear, and we would be ill hosts did we not offer you a roof."

Alianora shook her ruddy head stubbornly. A little frown appeared on the Duke's brow. "Wouldst not refuse?" he breathed gently.

"Would," snapped Alianora.

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"I'll wait oot here too," said Hugi quickly.

"Nay, go ye with Sir Holger," said the girl.

"But —" said Hugi.

"Ye heard me," said Alianora.

Alfric shrugged. "If you wish to join us, Sir Knight —" he hinted.

Holger nodded, climbed down, and doffed his armor and weapons. Papillon snorted and glared at the Faerie horses. Alianora loaded the equipment on him and took his bridle. "I'll await ye in the woods," she said, and led the stallion off. Holger's eyes followed her till she had disappeared.

They trooped into the castle then. The courtyard was wide, with trees and flower-beds and plashing fountains, music breathed on the air and there was a heavy smell of roses. Holger saw the women of Faerie gathered before the main keep and, for a while, forgot everything else. *Jumping Judas!* It was worth crossing universes just to get a look. He bowed to them in a kind of daze.

Alfric told off a small, green-skinned goblin slave to lead him to his quarters. "We will await you at dinner," he said graciously. Holger, with Hugi trotting in his wake, went through unending corridors, all high and vaulted and gleaming. Through arched doorways he had glimpses of jewel-blazing magnificence. Of course, when you could conjure such things from the air —

Up a long curving flight of polished stairs and down another hall and into a suite of rooms right out of the Arabian Nights. The goblin bowed and left them. Holger looked around at glowing carpets, jeweled mosaics, cloth-of-gold hangings, and through balcony windows at acres of gardens. There were tapers burning with a clear white light, and on one wall a tapestry whose figures moved as if they were alive. That was a jarring reminder of where he was.

"They do theirselves richt well here, I maun say," declared Hugi. "Still, I'd swap the whole caboodle to be back under ma ain old oak root. Here's a tricksy place."

"Mmm — yeh." Holger wandered into a bathroom that paled Hollywood. Soap and hot running water were royal blessings. There was even a mirror, scissors, and a razor. He came out feeling more human. On the bed lay a suit which must be meant for him, and he crawled into it to find it fitting him like another skin. Purple tunic, crimson hose, blue mantle, black velvet shoes, everything worked with gold thread and hung with precious stones — hm. He noticed a sword, shield, and set of armor in a corner. That was tactful of Alfric, though he could hardly carry weapons to dinner.

"Ah, 'tis a bra figure ye make, Sir Holger," said Hugi admiringly. "Belike ye'll have to fight off the Faerie dames. They're a lickerish lot here, 'tis said."

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"I wish I knew just why everyone's so friendly," said Holger. "The Pharisees are generally on pretty uneasy terms with mankind, aren't they? Then why should Alfric put himself out this way for me?"

"No telling, lad. Mayhap 'tis but a means to entrap ye. Then again, it may amuse him to do ye a kindness. Ye canna tell what the Faerie dwellers think or what they will do themselves. They know not theirselves, nor care."

"I feel guilty about going to dinner and letting you sit here and Alianora out in the woods."

"Och, they'll gi' me summat t' eat, and the lassie's happier where she is. I ken wha's in her mind. I'm t' help ye wi' rede and deed herein, whilst she waits ootside to do wha' she can if 'tis needed."

A goblin appeared to announce obsequiously that dinner was served. Holger followed him down long smoky-blue halls and into an enormous vaulted chamber. The lords and ladies of Faerie were like a melting rainbow where they sat at table. Goblin servants hurried about them, and music came from somewhere, and there was a buzz of talk and laughter.

Holger was seated at Alfric's left, between the Duke and a girl introduced as Meriven. She gave him a smile that turned his knees to rubber; he sat down in a stunned fashion and tried to make conversation.

Faerie talk, Holger gathered vaguely, was an art in itself: swift, witty, cynical, always a hint of poison and delicate malice, always with elaborate rules he didn't begin to understand. Well, probably immortals who had nothing to do but hunt, magic, intrigue, and wage war, would develop sophistication in sheer self-defense. They hadn't heard of forks here either, but the food and wine were a symphony. If that Meriven weren't so distracting — This was an *embarras de richesses.*

"Truly," she murmured, holding him with those curious eyes that, in her, no longer bothered him, "you are a bold man thus to venture hitherwards. That stroke you gave your enemy, ah, a thing of beauty!"

"You saw that?" he asked sharply.

"By magic, yes. As to whether we but jested, or meant it in earnest, Sir 'Olger, 'tis not good for a young man to know too much. A trace of puzzlement keeps him from stodginess." She laughed sweetly. "But tell me, what brings you hither?"

He grinned. "Nor should a young lady know too much," he answered.

"Ah, cruel! Yet am I glad you came." She used the intimate pronoun. "I may speak to you thus, fair sir? There is a kinship between us, even if we find ourselves at war now and again."

"Dearest enemy," murmured Holger. She lowered her eyes, smiling appreciatively. His own eyes had a tendency to drop too — that décolletage of hers — He searched around in his mind for more cribs from Shakespeare.

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They continued the flirtation throughout the banquet, which seemed to take hours. Afterward the company went into an even vaster hall for dancing. Duke Alfric drew Holger aside as the music started.

"Come with me a moment, if you will, good sir," he smiled. "We'd best talk over your problem now, so that I can think on it a while; for I foresee that our ladies will give you little peace."

"As you will," said Holger, a trifle grumpily. He didn't much care to remember realities just now.

They strolled into a garden and found a bench and sat down. A fountain murmured whitely beside them, and the liquid voice of a nightingale was in the willows. Alfric leaned gracefully back. "Say what you will, Sir 'Olger," he invited.

Well — no use holding anything back. If the Pharisee did have power to return him, he'd probably have to know everything. Only how do you describe an entire life — an entire world?

Holger did his best. Alfric guided him with a few penetrating questions. At the end, the Duke looked thoughtful. "A strange tale," he said. "I have never heard a stranger. Yet methinks there is truth in it."

"Can — can you help me?"

"I know not, Sir 'Olger — for so it still seems natural to call you. I know not. There are many worlds, as any sorcerer or astrologue is aware, but a plurality of universes is another tale. Yet some things in old writings do hint of it. I myself have speculated that another Earth such as you describe might indeed exist, and be the source of myths and legends — like those told of Frederik Barbarossa, or the great epical romances about the Emperor Napoleon."

After a silence, he went on: "I shall raise spirits which can give counsel. It will no doubt take a little time, but we shall strive to guest you well. I think there is good hope for success."

"You — you are much too kind —"

"Nay, not at all." Alfric waved a languid hand. "You mortals know not how tedious undying life can become, and how a riddle such as this is greeted with gladness. 'Tis I should thank you."

He rose, chuckling. "And now, methinks you're fain to go back to dancing," he said. "Good pleasaunce, my friend."

Holger returned slowly. It looked as if he'd been too hasty in judging the Middle World. Surely no one could have been more gracious and hospitable. Damn it, he liked the Pharisees.

He found Meriven in the ballroom. "I know not if I should greet you, Sir Knight," she pouted. "Off you went, with never a word, and left me all alone."

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"I'll try to make up for that," he said.

He didn't know any of their stately figure dances, but Meriven caught onto the tango at once; he'd never had a better partner. He wasn't sure how long the ball lasted. They may have left before it broke up. His memories of the rest of the night were remarkably pleasant.

VIII

Here there was no real morning or evening, day or night; the dwellers seemed to live according to whim. Holger woke up slowly and luxuriously, to find himself alone again; at exactly the right moment, the door opened and a goblin entered with a breakfast tray. Someone must have used witchcraft to learn his American tastes: ham and eggs, toast, buckwheat cakes, coffee, orange juice. By the time he was up and dressed, Hugi came in, looking worried. "Where were you?" asked Holger.

"Ah, I slept in the garden. It seemed the richt thing to do when ye were, uh, busy." The dwarf sat down, an incongruous brown blot in all the gold and scarlet and purple, and tugged at his beard. "I dinna like the air here. There's summat afoot, and 'tis an ill thing."

"You're prejudiced," said Holger, lighting his pipe from a candle and thinking mostly of a date he'd made to go hawking with Meriven.

"Och, they can put on a bra show here and bedazzle ye wi' all manner o' fine wines and loose lasses," grumbled Hugi, "but in all time there's been little friendship atwixt men and Faerie, and least of all noo when Chaos gathers for war. As for me, I ken wha' I ken. And this is what I spied as I lay in yon garden. Great flashes o' lightning and smoke from the topmost tower, a demon figure flying, and the smell o' witchcraft so rank it nigh curdled ma bones. And later from the west there came summat else, another flying figure, which landed on the tower and went inside. I think yon hexish Duke Alfric ha' summoned a weirdie to his aid."

"Why, of course," said Holger. "He told me he'd have to."

"Go on," muttered Hugi. "Have yer fun. Be gay in the teeth o' the lion. But when yer dead body lies oot for ravens to tear, say no I didna warn ye."

Holger's stubbornly objective mind made him consider the dwarf's dour words as he went downstairs. It could be. This might all be a gimmick to keep him from thinking until it was too late. Too late for what? Surely, if they intended evil, it would be simple to stab or poison him. He'd stood off one of their champions — who had probably only attacked him because he bore the arms of the mysterious paladin of the hearts and lions — but he wouldn't have a chance against a dozen. He dropped hand on the elf sword. It was a comforting thing to carry.

Meriven hadn't set a definite hour; time seemed forgotten here. Holger

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dawdled through the main hall. It occurred to him that he might look up the Duke and ask if there was any news. Let's see now, where would he be? On inquiry from a sullen kobold slave, Holger learned that the master's apartments were in the north wing, second floor. He mounted a flight of stairs three at a time, whistling cheerily.

He came out on the landing just as the Duke and a woman stepped from a door. He had barely a glimpse of her, she went swiftly back again, but it was stunning. This world seemed full of extraordinary lookers. She was no Faerie woman, she was taller and more full-bodied, her hair long and midnight black, her pale face curve-nosed and arrogant. A golden coronet was on her head, and a white dress swept the ground. Hm! The Duke was a lucky fellow.

Alfric's face smoothed itself out; Holger caught only the last fleeting sign of a scowl. "Good morrow, Sir 'Olger. How fare you?" As he bowed, he was making curious passes with his hands.

"Excellent well, my lord. I trust you too —"

"Ah, there you are, my naughty one. Wouldst run away from me?" Meriven took Holger's arm. Now where the devil had she come from? "Come, the horses are ready, we've some falconry to do." She bore him off almost before he could draw breath.

They had a good time, loosing their birds at cranes and wild peacocks and less familiar prey. Meriven chattered gaily all the while, and he had to laugh with her. That anecdote about the hunting of the basilisk — well, it was hardly fit for mixed company, but it was funny. Holger would have enjoyed himself more if memory hadn't been nagging at him again. That woman with the Duke — damn it to hell, he *knew* her!

He'd only had a flying look at her, but the image was sharp for him, and he knew that her voice would be low and her manner proud, capricious, sometimes kind and sometimes cruel, always strong and wild. Meriven seemed a rather pale creature beside — beside — what *was* her name?

"You're sad, my lord," said the Pharisee woman, laying a hand on his.

"Oh, no — no — I was just thinking."

"Fie on you! Come, let me make a charm to drive thought away, 'tis the child of care and the father of sorrow." Meriven snapped a branch off a tree, bent it, and gestured with some mutterings. It became a small harp, and she played it while singing him love songs. They did lull him, but —

As they neared the castle, Meriven caught his arm and pointed. "Nay, see! A unicorn! They've become rare hereabouts."

They glimpsed the graceful white beast gliding between the trees. A stray wisp of ivy had caught on its horn. Wait — He peered through the half-light. Wasn't that something walking beside it?

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A huntress look tensed Meriven's face. "If we steal close—" she whispered. Her horse moved forward on soundless feet.

The unicorn stopped, looked back, saw them and was away, a white shadow rapidly lost to sight. Meriven swore with unladylike imaginativeness. Holger said nothing, for he had seen what had been accompanying the unicorn. For just a moment he had locked eyes with Alianora, and then she was also gone.

"Well, lackaday, such is life." Meriven came back to him, and they rode together. "Be not so downcast, my lord. Mayhap we can get up a party and run the brute down sometime."

Holger wished he were better at deception. It wouldn't do to let the Pharisees guess his own suddenly rising suspicions, and at the same time he had to think them through. Not that he had any more reason than before to think badly of Faerie, but the sight of Alianora had triggered something in him.

"If you will forgive me, my lady," he said, "I'll go bathe before dinner."

"Oh, my bath is large enough for us both," she said innocently.

Holger wished he had a helmet to cover his ears, they felt pretty hot. "I'd like a short nap too," he said clumsily. Inspiration: "I must be at my best for you later on. There's so much competition."

He beat a retreat before she could insist, and almost ran to his apartments. Hugi looked up from the bed, where he had curled himself. Holger bent over him.

"I saw a woman this morning," he said, fast and softly; and he described her, not from the bare glimpse he had had but from a memory which seemed to stretch over many years. "Who is she?"

"Why—" Hugi rubbed his eyes. "It soonds like ye've spied Queen Morgan le Fay. Could it ha' been her whom Alfric summoned last night, from far-away Avalon? Aye, it must be, and then there's deviltry abroad for fair."

Morgan le Fay! That was it, he knew it with a certainty beyond knowledge. And Avalon, yes, there had been an island of birds and roses, rainbows and enchantment, but where and when and how had he been there? "Tell me about her," he urged. "Everything you know."

"Ho, is't yon doxy ye hanker after noo? She's na for the likes o' ye, lad, nor even for Duke Alfric. Cast no yer eyes too high up, lest the sun blind 'em."

"No, no, no! I just have to know, that's all. Maybe I can figure out why she's here."

"Well, noo — I dinna ken too much. Avalon lies far, far in the western ocean, 'tis a part o' the world wha' we've only old wives' tales about here.

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But all know that Morgan le Fay is sister to Arthur, the last great king o' the Britons, though in her the Faerie strain in yon family runs stronger and weird. She's the michtiest witch in Christendie or heathendom, and could belike match hersel' wi' aught in the Middle World. Immortal, she is, and a strange sort; none know if she stands wi' Law or Chaos. 'Tis said she bore off Arthur when he lay grievous wounded, to heal him and keep him against his time to return; but it could be that were but a sly-tongued excuse to hold him from just such a coming back. Aye, she's a kittle dame, and I'm no gleeful to be under one roof wi' her."

Still no proof. Morgan might have come here to help Alfric on Holger's problem, or she might have stopped in on some altogether different errand. But it looked funny—

A goblin appeared at the door. "The good Duke gives a feast for castle servants," he said. "You, dwarf, are invited."

"Ummm—" Hugi paused. "Thank ye, nay. I dinna feel so well."

The goblin raised his hairless brows. "'Twill be taken ill if you spurn the feast," he said.

Hugi traded a look with Holger. The man nodded. It might just be a device to get the dwarf out of the way, but there didn't seem any means of evading it. "Go on," he said. "Have a good time."

"Aye, so. Take care o' yersel'." Hugi trotted after the goblin. Holger entered the bath which had drawn itself for him and lay smoking and pondering. He felt as if he were caught in spider webs. Very subtle, very delicate, but you couldn't get out. For a panicky moment he wanted to scream and run.

He checked himself. Nothing he could do now except string along. After all, his suspicions were based on so little. Still—

A new suit of party clothes was laid out for him. He got into it, and had hardly finished when the doorknob formed into metallic lips and said politely: "Duke Alfric would see you if you will be so kind."

"Yipe!" said Holger. Recovering himself: "Come in, p-please do." He thought that apparently slaves, being beneath notice, came and went without asking, while the upper classes respected each other's privacy.

The Pharisee entered, his pale handsome face smiling at the man. "I bring good news," he said. "I have conferred with numerous of the Powers, and there is an excellent chance of returning you."

"Why—why—I cannot thank you."

"'Twill take some time to gather the necessaries for the spells," said Alfric. "In the meantime, methinks a special merrymaking is called for. There's to be entertainment tonight in Elf Hill."

"Hm, yes—Oh, yes. I've seen the place."

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Alfric took his arm. "Come, then. I warrant you'll have a lusty time. The elves therein know how to make a man glad."

Holger didn't quite feel up to an orgy, but there was no way to refuse. Anyway, it should be — interesting. They went down the stairs. The castle dwellers were gathering, a gay and violently colorful swirl through the long halls and out into the courtyard. Meriven appeared from among them, and Alfric relinquished Holger to her.

"I'll go with you in there," she said. "I've no mind to let some elfish wench steal you for a while yet."

"Why, isn't everyone coming along?" he asked.

"Oh, presently. You and I are to go in first, then the others will follow later. You shall see how 'tis planned."

Holger thought of death-traps and dismissed the notion. After all, one of their own was accompanying him.

The procession wound out of the gates and over the lawns toward Elf Hill of the roses. Behind him curveted warriors on horseback, banners flying from their lances, and musicians playing lutes and harps and horns, and a hundred lords and ladies of Faerie; almost, they danced as they neared the hill. And now Holger heard music coming from it, a wild and skirling sweetness that caught in his blood and sang in his head. He smiled down at Meriven, and she laughed back, her loose pale hair blowing in the wind, and hung close on his arm. The hill opened, soundlessly, and he glimpsed wavering brilliant lights and tall figures standing black against them. The music was in him, he hurried his feet, he couldn't wait.

Hoofbeats rolled in the earth. A horse neighed, loud and angry. Whirling, Holger saw Alianora on Papillon, galloping out of the woods, and the girl's face was distorted with terror.

"Holger —! Nay, Holger, nay, no in there!"

IX

Behind him, Alfric shouted an oath. A spear flashed through the air at the swan-may. Holger stood for a moment, locked in amazement. "Get him in the hill!" bellowed Alfric.

Meriven yanked at his arm, and three Pharisees plunged forward like football tackles. With a sudden redness of rage, Holger launched himself to meet them. He stiff-armed the nearest, who went soaring backwards to fall and lie quietly. His right fist swung around, still trailing Meriven from the arm, and smashed another handsome face. The third body he dodged. A knight loomed before him, lance almost in his throat. He tore the grimly clutching Meriven loose, lifted her over his head, and pitched her into the rider's midriff. Both went down over the horse's tail.

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Three knights were closing in on Alianora, to halt her. Papillon reared, striking out with his hoofs, and one of them went banging from the saddle. The huge black stallion turned and bit a chunk out of the next Faerie horse, which screamed and bolted. The third rider was slashing at Alianora, who ducked his sword and sprang to the ground.

"Hai!" She had leaped almost into the arms of a mail-clad Faerie lord. He grabbed her up, grinning as she fought and spat. Suddenly he held a swan. And swans have vicious tempers.

"Yi!" he cried as she pecked at his eyes. "Yee!" he added as her wing-buffets almost broke his arm. "Help!" he finished when she nipped off a finger, and dropped her and fled.

The Pharisees boiled around Holger, hewing and thrusting at his unarmored body. He was too excited to feel anything, though a remote part of him wondered at the incredible luck which was getting him by with minor flesh wounds. He fed the nearest enemy a mouthful of knuckles, grabbed the being's sword loose, and began hacking around him. It was lighter than iron, he could swing it one-handed, but the edge was keen. An axman cut down at his bare head. He caught the haft with his free hand, wrenched it loose, and waded with ax and sword into the Pharisees.

Papillon attacked the crowd from behind, trampling and kicking and biting. All at once the black horse was there, beside him, and he had vaulted up on him and they whirled about and galloped from the castle.

Hoofbeats rang behind them. Turning his head, Holger saw the mounted Pharisees were bearing down. Their beasts were faster than even the incredibly fast Papillon. He remembered hearing that Faerie folk couldn't stand iron, and got his own sword and shield where they hung. There was hardly time to put on the armor bundled behind his saddle.

The swan winged white beside him. Suddenly she swerved. An eagle struck where she had been. She flapped wildly, and Holger saw more eagles coming from the sky. *Oh, my God, they're turning themselves into birds, they'll get her now —*

Alianora hissed, beat away with wings and beak between two of them, and streaked for the forest. There might be shelter for her under its trees, if she turned human again — but if she did that, how could she get away?

A white horse pulled up alongside Holger. Alfric himself was on it, his long pale hair streaming from a face that still smiled. Vaguely through the drumming hoofbeats and the cloven air and the hunting horns blowing to his rear, Holger heard his shout: "Now let's try you, Sir 'Olger de Danemark, and see if indeed you're invincible!"

"Gladly!" snarled Holger. The Duke had drawn up on his unshielded right side, but he was past caring. His sword hammered down, meeting the

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lighter Faerie blade in midair. Alfric's weapon twisted, slithering in past Holger's guard. The Dane turned around in the saddle, raised his shield, and brought the edge down to knock that glaive aside. His own belled against Alfric's shield, driving the Duke's arm back. Alfric was yanking his sword up for another thrust. Holger was too slow to parry, his blade merely scraped Alfric's hand.

The Duke screamed. Holger saw smoke spurt from the hand, and caught a smell of singed flesh. Alfric's sword dropped, and his horse stampeded. Iron — yes, by Heaven, it was true what they said. The weird Pharisee metabolism just couldn't endure the touch of iron.

Holger reined in Papillon so clods jumped underfoot. Turning, he reared the stallion and waved his sword and howled at the approaching riders: "All right, come and get it! Step right up and lay right down!"

They hesitated, slowing their gallop. Squinting through the twilight, Holger saw warriors on foot in their wake, carrying bows. Hai, that wasn't so good, they could stand afar and fill him with arrows. Recklessly, he plunged toward them with some idea of breaking up the formation. "Rah, rah, rah!" he shouted. "*Ti-i-i-ger!*"

The riders scattered before his charge. A few bowmen stood their ground, firing at him. He felt one shaft buzz nastily by his ear. "*Jesu Kriste Fili Mariae* —"

The Pharisees screamed! They turned and spurred horses, throwing away their weapons, running and galloping from him like an explosion. By Heaven, thought Holger, it was also true that they couldn't stand to hear a holy name. He should have remembered that. Only — why had his unthinking appeal been in Latin?

He was tempted to throw the whole hierarchy after them, but decided not to abuse his privilege. No telling what might happen if he did. He settled for turning Papillon back westward and shouting, "Hi-yo, Silver!"

After all, the story was that the Faerie folk didn't like silver either.

Now, Alianora. He trotted along the fringe of the woods, calling her name, but there was no answer. His exuberance died within him. If she were lying dead — Hell's fire, he thought with stinging eyes, it wasn't that he would be all alone in this world of enemies, it was that she was a wonderful kid and had given him life itself. And how had he repaid her? he asked himself glumly. What sort of companion was he, guzzling and swilling and making up to alien women while she lay in the cold dew and —

"*Alianora!*"

No answer. No sound at all. The wind had laid itself to rest, the castle was hidden in rising mists, the forest was a wall of night before him. Nothing moved, nothing spoke; he was the only thing which had life in all this dim-

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ness. He thought uneasily that he couldn't dawdle around here forever. The Pharisees would soon have some way figured to get at him. They could swiftly summon allies who were not bothered by iron or God. Morgan le Fay, for instance. If he meant to escape, he'd better do it quickly.

He rode westward along the forest boundaries, calling for Alianora. The fog was deepening, rising out of the ground in white banks and streamers. It muffled the sound of Papillon's hoofs, it seemed to smother his own breathing. Drops glistened in the horse's mane and his shield glimmered wet. The world was closing in, he could hardly see two yards now, and still the mist rolled in on him.

It must be a Faerie stunt, he thought with a gulp of fear. They could blind him with fog, and thereafter he would be easy to trap or kill. He urged Papillon into a faster trot. In spite of the chill damp, his mouth felt dry.

Something loomed before him, vague and white in the curling grayness. "Hola!" he yelled. "Who's there? Stand or I'll have at you!"

Laughter answered, not the wicked snickering of Faerie but a clear young mirth that rang inside him. "'Tis but I, Holger. I had to mount mysel' too; your horse will no carry double all the long way we must gang, and my wings would weary."

She came into sight, a brown slim figure in white feather-tunic. Dewdrops twinkled in her bronze-colored hair. She was riding a unicorn bareback, probably the same one he had seen earlier. It looked at him with wary eyes and wouldn't come too close. Mounted before her was the small hunched form of Hugi.

"I doubled back to fetch this lad," she said, "and then we went into the woods again and I whistled up this little pet o' mine. But ye'll have to carry him now, for 'twas all I could do to make Einhorn here carry any but me even so short a way."

Holger felt ashamed of himself. He'd completely forgotten Hugi. And a peeved Duke Alfric would probably have made short work of the dwarf. Reaching out, he hoisted the little man from the unicorn's back and onto his own saddlebow.

"Now what should we do?" he asked.

"Noo we maun galumph it quick's may be oot o' this ill realm," grunted Hugi. "Sooner we're in honest lands, better our chances be o' living to brag aboot this dunce's trip."

"Hm, yes. Though I'm afraid we'll get lost in this fog."

"I'll turn swan and fly up now and again above it," said Alianora. "Thus we'll outtrick them who vapored this up."

They trotted through a wet gray soundless murk. Holger was feeling the reaction of battle: it took the shape of a conviction of his own uselessness.

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What was he good for, except to drag fine resourceful people like Alianora into peril of their lives? What had he done, even, to earn the food he'd eaten so far? He was a pensioner, that was all, a bumbling idiot kept alive by sheer charity, and —

He remembered a question he had. "Hugi," he asked, "why was it dangerous for me to go into Elf Hill?"

"Know ye na that?" The little fellow raised his brows. "So yon's why they lured me from ye, so I couldna give warning! Well, then, as all know, time is strange inside Elf Hill. They'd have held ye there wi' one nicht o' merrymaking, and when ye came oot ag'in, a hundred years would ha' passed here. In the meantime, the Middle Worlders would ha' been able to do whate'er 'tis ye noo stand in the way o'."

Holger shuddered.

It did throw a different light on his own status, though. It was unthinkable that Alfric and Morgan could have continued to mistake him for someone else whose arms he bore. Therefore he himself, Holger Carlsen, orphan and exile, *he* was in some way a focal point of the gathering crisis. Just how, he couldn't imagine. Possibly his coming from another universe gave him — what? An aura? At any rate, the forces of Chaos had to win him to their side or, failing that, to get him out of the way.

The lavish hospitality, including Meriven, had obviously been an attempt at the first. It had also served to hoodwink him while Alfric summoned and conferred with Morgan le Fay. They had, it seemed, decided to take no chances, but use his ignorance to get him into Elf Hill for the next century or two. Now that he was on to them, they'd probably try simply to kill or capture him.

But why hadn't they slipped a knife in his ribs the first opportunity they got? It would have been the easiest thing to do. Indeed, the hollow knight's attack must have been such an attempt; then when that failed, for some reason Alfric had changed tactics and used guile. *Why?*

Mother Gerd — Hm, yes, the spirit she raised must have told her that which made her direct him to her powerful acquaintance in Faerie. But what had the demon said?

Meanwhile, his avenue of return was gone. He'd have to cast around for another means. There seemed to be white magicians in this world as well as black; perhaps he could consult one of them. He had no intentions of mixing into the struggle here if he could avoid it. One war at a time, please!

Something laughed in the fog, low and hideously. Holger started, and Hugi clapped his hands to his ears. They heard wings overhead, but they could only see the dripping gray mists.

"It seems to be in front of us," said Holger uneasily. "If we turn around —"

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"Nay," said Alianora. He could just barely discern how her lip trembled, but she spoke gamely. "'Tis a trick to get us off the path. Once lost in this fog, we're indeed without hope."

"Okay, then," said Holger out of a sandy throat. "I'll go first."

It was a nerve-racking ride, with glimpses of things slipping and sliding just on the fringe of sight, slitherings and hissings and howls and laughs. Once a face appeared, blind and terrible, just in front of him. It hung in the mist and mouthed. He plowed stubbornly ahead, and it receded before him. Hugi shut his eyes.

It seemed forever before the fog slowly lifted. That was on the fringe of the twilight zone. Papillon and the unicorn broke into eager gallop, and they burst out of Faerie and neighed at the sun.

It was low in the west, throwing long shadows across wild, cragged hills and rearing pines. The wind slid thin and cold around them, and they could hear the hollow booming of a waterfall. But daylight — it was a heart-lifting vision. Holger wondered how long they had been in the twilight land. Several days, at least.

"Yon Pharisees can pursue us after dark," said Alianora, "yet their spells be less strong out here, and we've a better hope." Her voice was dull with weariness, and Holger realized how tired he was too.

They urged their mounts forward, though, to get as far as they could before sundown. When they made camp, it was high on a slope, well inside a pine wood. Holger lopped two saplings with his sword and made a cross of them, which he planted near the bonfire that they'd keep going all night. Hugi's precautions were more pagan, a ring of stones and iron objects laid down with incantations.

"Now," said Alianora, "methinks we'll last the dark hours." She smiled at Holger. "Did I tell ye erenow how valiantly ye fought, back there at the castle? Ho, 'twas a bra sight!"

"Why, uh, uh, thanks." Holger looked at the ground, and dug at it with his toes. Still, it was nice to be admired by a pretty girl.

Night stole over them. Beyond the firelight was only a soughing blackness. Holger, who had the third watch, stretched himself out on the needle-softened forest floor. He'd had a bite to eat, and the fire was warm and red, and one by one his tautened nerves were easing. He hadn't thought he could sleep, but he lost consciousness even as he was lamenting the prospect of insomnia.

He woke with a jerk. Alianora was shaking him. In the weaving, shadowy red light, her eyes were enormous, and her voice was a dry little whisper. "Quickly! Come, list, there's summat out there!"

He got to his feet, the mail in which he had slept clashing around him,

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and peered into the darkness. Yes, stirrings, a slow stealthy pad of many feet, and there the light gleamed in long slant eyes —

A wolf howled, almost in his ear. He leaped and slashed with his sword. Laughter answered, shrill and nasty. "*In nomine Patris*—" he called, but the mirth jeered at him. Either those things were immune to holy names, or they weren't close enough to be hurt — probably the former. Now he could see the shadows, gliding around and around the charmed circle, and they were monstrous.

Hugi crouched shuddering beside the fire. Alianora moaned and crept into Holger's free arm. He held her close, feeling the shivers in her. "Take it easy," he said.

"But 'tis their sendings," she gasped. "'Tis they themselves, belike, night-ganging all around us."

"*Ja*," he said. Funny how he didn't feel scared; not much, anyway. Thank God for a phlegmatic temperament! "But they can't get at us, dear, or they'd be doing so."

"But — But —"

"I've seen rivers which could drown a whole valley penned behind dams, but no one feared. The dam holds."

Privately, he wondered what the safety factor of their charms was. No doubt magicians in this world had their equivalent of the Rubber Handbook, with tables of such data. Or if they didn't, they jolly well ought to. He had to go by God and by guess, but somehow — another buried memory rising in him? — he felt that their defenses were strong enough.

"Just take it easy," he said. "We'll be all right. They can't do more than keep us awake with that infernal racket."

She was still trembling, so he kissed her. She responded with an uncertain, inexperienced clumsiness. He grinned out at the hosts of the Middle World. If they were going to sit and watch him neck, he hoped they'd learn something.

X

Before dawn, the besiegers were off. They'd have to get back to their lairs in plenty of time. What was it about sunlight they couldn't stand — actinic radiation? If so, he wished he had an ultra-violent lamp. Having slept fitfully, he and Hugi and Alianora caught a two or three hours' nap before breakfast. They resumed travel feeling more refreshed than he had expected. Alianora still rode the unicorn; he wondered what her influence over the shy beast was.

"Now where should we go?" he asked.

"I dinna know," she answered thoughtfully. "To dwellings o' man,

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mayhap. 'Tis clear that Faerie is out after ye, Holger —" she used the intimate form now, and smiled adoringly at him — "so ye'll need a shielding o' powerful magic."

"The need had occurred to me," Holger admitted. "But the only genuine witch I've met in this world sent me straight into a Faerie ambush. Aren't there any magicians who'll work *against* the coming of Chaos?"

"Ane there be," said the swan-may thoughtfully, "though I dinna ken how great be his powers. Plain Martin was he born, but now he hight Martinus Trismegistus and gi'es himsel' oot as Master of Arts Magical. 'Tis toward his village o' Tarnberg we should wend; mayhap he can aid ye."

"It's an idea," he said. "That gives us our first objective: Tarnberg and the Master. But what if this local marvel finds he can't bat against the big-league pitchers?" Holger saw bewilderment begin to mar her adoring gaze and hastily explained, "I mean: supposing a country practitioner like that can't handle such experts as Alfric and Morgan le Fay?"

"Then belike ye should seek to reach the Empire; they'd welcome a strong knight there." She sighed, misty-eyed. "Not since Carl's day has there been one like ye."

"Who was this Carl?" he asked. "I've heard the name before."

"Why, he was the founder o' the Holy Empire, the king who made Christendie strong and rolled the Saracens back into Spain — Carl the Great, Carolus Magnus, surely ye've heard o' him."

"Mmmm — maybe I have." Holger searched his mind. It was hard to tell what part of his knowledge came from his education and what from those inexplicable memories that were rising ever more often within him. "Do you mean Charlemagne?"

"So some call him. I see his fame has reached even to your America. 'Tis said he had many bold knights to serve him, though I've only heard tales o' that Roland who fell at Roncesvalles."

Holger's brain went into a spin. Was he in the past after all? No, impossible; and yet Charlemagne was certainly a historical figure.

Ah, he had it. The Carolingian legends, the *Chansons de Geste*. By gosh, that fitted! Fairyland and Saracens, swan-mays and unicorns and witchcraft, Roland and Oliver — Holy jumping Judas! Had he somehow fallen into a — a — book?

No, no. That didn't make sense. It was more reasonable to keep on supposing this another universe, one with some unknown connection to his own, so that parallels existed; and from time to time, transitions like his must have been made, or at least there had been glimpses, and out of those grew legend. The Carl of this world could not be identical with the Charlemagne of his own, but somehow they had fulfilled corresponding roles.

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Yes, now it struck him, Hugi had spoken of Morgan as King Arthur's sister. *The* Arthur! Holger wished he'd read the old stories closely; he had only a dim childhood recollection of them.

Hm, what else could he recall, though? Let's see, Carl's knights had included Roland and Oliver and Huon and — Wait a minute, where did he remember Huon from? The dark strange face rose in his mind, laughing with the velvet sardonicism which had so often irritated the others: Huon de Bordeaux, yes, he had finally gone off and become a king or duke or something in Faerie. *But how do I know that?*

Hugi's grumbling voice broke his train of thought and sent half-grasped memories scurrying back into darkness. "'Twill na be a funnish trip we make, if each nicht we maun list to they long-legged beasties howl beyond the fire."

"Nay, I think they'll no keep that up," answered Alianora. "'Tis o' no use to them, sairly now when they must be busied gathering their hosts for the war." She frowned. "Yet may they well try summat else. Alfric's no one to give up easy."

That idea was scarcely pleasant company.

They scrambled higher into the hills, bearing northwest at Alianora's direction. By noon they were far up and the air was cold. Here it was all crags and boulders and tumbling cliffs, now and then a stretch of wiry grass or a gnarled and stunted tree. They could see enormously far on every hand, from the receding darkness of Faerie to the gentler, forested lands of the west, and straight down for hundreds of feet into windy canyons where glacial rivers roared and thundered. The sky was pale overhead, ragged streamers of cloud hurrying across it, and the light was chill and brilliant.

They found a sheltering bluff behind which to stop for lunch. Holger, gnawing away at a slab of stone-hard bread with a hunk of rubbery cheese laid on it, couldn't resist griping. "Is Denmark the only land in all the worlds where they know how to make a sandwich? Now if you gave me some thin-sliced rye bread, and butter, and baby shrimp, and eggs, and —"

"Ye cook too!" Alianora looked at him with pure worship.

"Uh, well, that is —"

She snuggled close against him. He found it a bit disconcerting, having grown up with the idea — or illusion — that the man always takes the initiative. "Now come the chance," she murmured, "I shall fetch for ye all ye require, and we shall ha' us a feast, just the two o' us —"

"Hm," said Hugi, "methinks I'll go squint at the weather."

"Hey, come back!" yelped Holger, but the dwarf had already gone.

"He's a good little man," said Alianora, laying her arms around Holger's neck. "He kens when a lass needs comforting."

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"Now, wait a minute — Look here, I mean you're awful nice and I like you a lot, but — I mean — Oh, hell! Never mind!" Holger gave up and gathered her in.

Hugi landed almost in their laps. "A dragon!" he screamed. "A dragon flying hither!"

"*Huh?*" Holger jumped up, spilling Alianora. "What, where —"

"A firedrake, winging oot o' Faerie, oh, 'tis been sent by Alfric and noo we're done!" Hugi clung to the man's legs. "Save us, knight!"

Papillon was snorting and shivering, and the unicorn was already off. Alianora ran after it, whistling, and it stopped for her and then leaped from sight. Holger snatched up Hugi, mounted, and galloped on her trail.

He could see the monster now. It was flying from the east, and the thunderclaps of its wings came remotely to his ears. Fifty feet long it must be, he thought in a gibberish of panic, 50 sinuous feet of scale-armored muscle, a snaky head which could swallow him in two bites, leathery wings flapping and crashing as it hunted them. He didn't need to spur Papillon, the horse was already crazed with fear and bolting after the unicorn. Sparks rained from his iron shoes, and the noise of hoofs on rock blent with the nearing whistle of air.

"Yi-yi-yi!" wailed Hugi. "'Tis roasted we'll be!"

The dragon saw them and swooped down, overhauling the horses with terrible speed. Holger risked a glance back and saw flame and smoke shooting from the fanged mouth. He had a brief instant of wonder about the dragon's metabolism; and what law of nature in this universe permitted that hulk to fly? The wind was on his back, and he caught a stinging reek of sulfur dioxide.

"There — yon —" Alianora's voice drifted to him down the ridge, and he saw her pointing at a narrow cave-mouth in a cliff. "In there, he can no follow us!

"No!" bellowed Holger. "Don't do it! It's death!"

She cast a frightened glance back at him, but obediently urged the unicorn away from the cave. Holger felt the first billow of heat on his back. Ye gods, if they holed up in that place, the dragon could suffocate them in minutes, just by breathing in at them.

"Water!" he roared. "We've got to get to water!"

Up and over the stony land they fled, almost flying, while the beat of wings and the rumble of flames grew louder behind them. Holger wished for his lance, left in Faerie, and drew his sword instead. But what chance did he have in a fight? The dragon could grill him in his armor.

He didn't stop to think just why he had to find water. There was only time to flee, across the hills, along the edge of precipices, scrambling down

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gorges and up the other side. Papillon screamed as flame scorched him.

Then they burst over a crest, and there was a stream below them, 30 feet of greenish haste. The unicorn plunged in, sheeting spray, Papillon followed, and they stopped in mid-river. It struck ice into their dangling feet.

Turning, they saw the dragon land. It crouched on the bank, hissing like an angry locomotive. Afraid of water, yes, Holger's guess had been right. But —

" 'Twill fly above us, snatch us into the air," gasped Alianora.

"Down in the river, then!" Holger splashed to the pebbly stream-bed. The current swirled around his chest, clawing at him. Alianora hung tight to his arm, and Hugi grabbed his cloak. "We can duck underneath when it comes," said Holger.

But they couldn't stay down long enough. They were done.

Yeah — done to a turn!

The dragon flapped bat-wings again and rose clumsily. Its shadow fell on them as it stooped overhead, reaching low. The blistering flames got closer.

Flames — ! Holger yanked off his helmet and scooped it full of water. The dragon rushed down, and he threw up an arm to protect his face. Blindly, he swung the helmet.

Steam exploded around him. The dragon screamed, nearly splitting his eardrums. It wobbled in the air, dashing its neck to and fro. Holger cursed and splashed more water at it. That just hit the taloned feet and didn't hurt, but the dragon whimpered. Suddenly it turned about and flew away, still screaming. It flew slowly and painfully.

Holger's breath sobbed from his lungs. He stood for a while, till the monster was out of sight, then he led the others back to shore.

"Oh, Holger, Holger!" Alianora clung to him, shaking and weeping and laughing. "How'd ye do it? How'd ye do it, best o' all knights?"

"Oh, well, that. A little thermodynamics, dear, that's all." Holger felt his face gingerly. He'd picked up a few heat blisters, but nothing bad.

"Truly a mighty magic," said Alianora in awe.

"No, no. Look, if it breathed fire, then it had to be even hotter inside. So I just tossed half a gallon of water down its gullet. Caused a small boiler explosion." Holger waved his hand with elaborate casualness. "Nothing to it."

XI

By midafternoon, they were on the lower slopes of the range, in a broad and sunny valley. Beech and poplar rustled above long grass full of primroses, a brook tinkled nearby, a flock of starlings fluttered off as they

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approached. It seemed an ideal place to take a rest such as they and the mounts badly needed.

After a defensive circle was set up, Alianora yawned prettily and curled up and went to sleep inside it. Hugi sat down at the foot of the cross, whittling, but Holger felt restless. "I think I'll look around a bit," he said. "Call me if anything goes wrong."

"Is't safe for ye to go off alone?" asked the dwarf. He answered himself: "Aye, o' coorse 'tis. What is there can harm *ye*?"

Holger's ears burned. He was the man of the hour just now, but he knew damn well what a series of lucky accidents had gotten him there. "I won't go far," he said.

He got his pipe lighted and strolled off, jingling a bit. The scene around him was utterly peaceful: meadows, blossoms, sunlit trees, Papillon and the unicorn cropping beside the stream, the liquid notes of a thrush from a little copse. It would be easy just to sit down and blot up sunshine and, if he thought at all, to consider Alianora. But no. He wrenched his mind away. He had some heavier thinking to do.

He was quite sure now that the old professor had been right — how long ago it had been! — in speculating about multiple infinities of coexistent universes, each with its own laws of nature. This was the one in which Carolingian legend happened to be true, in which magic (mental control of inanimate matter?) was real, in which — He hardly dared to list all the differences. And it was possible to go from one cosmos to another; it must have been done in the past, and accounts of such journeys had been written down as myth and romance on his Earth. But there was more to it than that. Being all embedded in the same ultimate reality, these universes seemed to share a strangely parallel course of events.

Let's face it: somehow he was a crucial figure, or at least an important one, in this Carolingian world. In the light of what had been happening, it seemed more than coincidence that Papillon, supernaturally strong and intelligent, should have been waiting just where he woke up, and with equipment that exactly fitted his own outsize frame. The horse had certainly seemed to know him. . . . Hm, there had been a Charlemagne in each world. Perhaps he himself was, somehow, doubled. But then *who* was he? And why, and how?

The camp was lost to sight as he wandered on. He fumed smoke and tried to fit what he had learned into a pattern. This business of Chaos versus Law, now, it seemed to be more than just a religious belief. It reminded him vaguely of the second law of thermodynamics, the tendency toward disorder and level entropy. Perhaps here the struggle between the two forces was basic to the universe. The wild folk of the Middle World would

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be doing what they could to break down order and restore some primeval state where anything could happen. Ordinary humanity would want to strengthen and extend Law, safety, predictability; that was doubtless why Christianity and Mohammedanism alike frowned on sorcery, which derived from Chaos forces rather than the unvarying principles of physical nature. Though come to think of it, magic seemed to have laws of its own. A definite ritual was needed to do this or that. Gerd had mentioned something about the impersonal character of the supernatural: a saint's relics, for instance, would work miracles for anyone who possessed them. . . . Yes, that was why Roland had tried to break Durandal at Roncesvalles, so it wouldn't fall into paynim hands. . . .

He was being driven to the conclusion that there was some basic animism in the universe, a purposefulness if you liked; and since all the worlds were connected, it had to be true in his own also, though there the Mind worked less obviously. You might as well call it God. And was there a Devil too? Holger turned away from the thought, not because it was unpleasant but because he didn't have enough facts. Best to stick to what he had directly observed. Laws of magic, hm.

Given time, his engineer's mind might be able to figure out some fixed principles of thaumaturgy and thereby bring it wholly into the realm of Law. Perhaps that was why Faerie was out to get him? No, at best that could only be part of the answer. He remembered a life in his own world, from childhood on, but somehow he had had another life too. Those memories had been robbed. No, rather, they had been forced back into his subconcious, and only under unusual stimuli did they come back.

A thought drifted through him. *Cortana.* Where had he heard that name? Oh, yes, the nickel had mentioned it. Cortana was a sword. It had been filled full of magic, but now it lay buried, hidden away. *Once I held Cortana, when brands were flashing on a stricken field!*

He walked around a clump of trees, into a small bower. Morgan le Fay stood there.

TO BE CONCLUDED

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So now Gavagan's is serving secret agents yet! It's a very hush hush evening, with Mr. Cohan pouring a proper Collins for this felly who's been behind the Iron Curtain, grabbed the "plans" and then lost them! Of course, since this is Gavagan's, it's not enough to combine border guards, Dr. Tobolka, trapped spies, plenty of slivovitz and a vanishing magician; there has to be a kobold or two thrown in for good measure!

One Man's Meat

by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP
and FLETCHER PRATT

IT WAS A very quiet night at Gavagan's, with the wavy-haired young Mr. Keating from the library and Dr. Tobolka slowly exchanging views on some subject of interest to them only over a rye-and-soda and a glass of slivovitz respectively, when the middle-aged man came in with a package under his arm.

He was dressed in a neat blue serge and wore glasses, and he reached across the bar with, "Mr. Cohan? Name of Smith. I'm told you can probably help me with a problem of some importance."

Mr. Cohan dried his hands on his apron and shook hands. "Pleased to meet you. And what would you be wanting?"

"I want to find a Czechoslovak magician, and I'm informed that if one can be located, you're the man to do it."

Mr. Cohan put one hand to the side of his face, frowned, and said, "Dr. Tobolka here now would be the kind of man you want if he was a magician, which he is not."

The snub-nosed Tobolka turned. "He means me. Will you have a drink and explain to me why you need a Czech? Won't rabbits come out of hats just as rapidly for a Swede or an Argentine?"

"It's strictly a Czech magician I had in mind," said Smith. "And I don't think I will have a drink just now — no discourtesy intended."

"Oh, you mean like that felly Theophrastus V. Abaris," said Mr. Cohan. "More like a Greek he was, and I'm thinking not too healthy a man for you to know. Now what would you be wanting another one like him for?"

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Smith glanced around. "That's something I'm afraid I'm not in a position to state right now," he said. "That is, unless I find my man."

"Perhaps you've found him as a team operation," said Keating. "I've done a good deal of study of magic back in the stacks, and Dr. Tobolka is a Czech."

Smith stared at him for a minute. "It has to be here or nowhere," he said. "May I ask you gentlemen your first names?"

"Walter," said Keating, while Tobolka produced a neat cardcase and handed Smith an item from its contents. "Excuse me a moment," said the man with the package, and stepped to the phone booth.

"Looks like a man with a mission," commented Keating, as the door closed behind the newcomer.

"If you're asking me, he acts like a felly with a hole in his head," said Mr. Cohan. "Can you imagine it now, refusing good liquor in Gavagan's? What does he think this is, that Italian place around the corner?"

"Some people have to be careful," said Tobolka. "On the Committee for Czechoslovak Freedom, now, we —"

The phone booth door swung open and Mr. Smith emerged, looking relieved. He stepped across to the bar and laid his package on it. "The FBI says you're both all right," he said, "so I can tell you about the problem. Now I will not only have a drink with you, I will buy a round for everyone, including you, of course, Mr. Cohan. Make mine a Collins, not too sweet."

He turned, faced the others, and took the wrapping from the package. "This," he said, "is the essence of the matter."

Keating said, "It looks like a kind of sausage, with a heavy coating of wax."

"That's what it is," said Tobolka, prodding it with one finger. "It's called a Bismarck sausage, and they make them in Saxony and Sudetenland. The wax is to keep it from becoming unendurable as human company."

"Ah!" said Smith, drinking deeply from his Collins. "I'm a salesman for Singer sewing machines."

Neither of the others appeared to be able to follow the connection, but "Isn't that fine, now," said Mr. Cohan from behind the bar.

Not so fine as you might think (said Smith). What I'm going to tell you, you mustn't breathe to a living soul, and I wouldn't tell it even then but for the emergency. I sold Singer sewing machines in Czechoslovakia up to a little time ago. Travelling through the country in a car, one of those little German Volkswagens. And while I was travelling, I was picking up certain — uh, documents of interest to our government from people opposed to the Communist regime.

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("Spies?" said Tobolka.)

People on our side (said Smith). I had a portable special made with a false bottom to carry the documents in, and as my profession allowed me to travel all through the countryside, it made an ideal arrangement. Well, last — uh, you will pardon me if I don't give the date, it might involve other people — a short time ago there was given to me a document of most unusual importance. It was a map of the big new arsenal and munitions depot at Prodnice, with all the tank traps, antiaircraft positions and guard stations indicated, the biggest thing in Czech armament and the most secret.

("I was born near there," said Tobolka, "only it was Austrian and called Wörsten then.")

I don't think you'd recognize it now. Shortly after I got the map, I heard that the Russians had become dissatisfied with the way things were going in Czechoslovakia, and had decided to tighten up by installing their own people in key positions in the more important Ministries — Agriculture, the Interior, Education — with Russian a required course in the schools, and so on.

Now that meant trouble for me. In Czechoslovakia the police and border guards are under the Interior Ministry, and wherever I had to show my papers, I would be running into Russian MVD men, who are a lot tougher than the Czechs I had been dealing with. I had impressive evidence of just how difficult it was going to be when I got to Pilsen. My contact there was a man we called Ales. He was a journalist, which gave him an excuse for running around a lot and asking questions. We used to meet at an inn on the Ludmilla Gasse, pretend a kind of nodding acquaintance, and after a drink or two — by the way, Mr. Cohan, there seem to be empty glasses on the bar. Will you do something about it? After a drink or two he'd get up to go, leaving behind a newspaper with the reports folded into it.

On this particular day I knew there was something wrong the minute I stepped into the place. We always met at the same table. There was a man at it, sipping beer, and he had a newspaper, but it wasn't Ales. Of course, it might be someone working for him, but I thought it safer to sit down at another table and size things up. After a while one of the waiters shuffled over to take my order. He bent over as though he were a little hard of hearing when I spoke, and then said under his breath, "Go. Russky."

Well, you can believe I finished my beer in a hurry and got out of there. If they had Ales, they probably had a warning out for me, with some kind of a description, and it was going to be touch and go to get across the frontier. So I headed in the direction of Prestice, Klattau and Eisenstein. That would be the quickest route to Bavaria, which is in the American zone of Germany.

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Dr. Tobolka here knows that this took me right into the heart of the Böhmerwald, which is just about the biggest and oldest forest in Europe, all full of legends. It's supposed to be where the kobolds lived — beautiful country, rather wild, and not many people.

I got through Klattau where, as I had hoped, there was only an ordinary Czech police post which made no trouble about my papers, and was on my way to Eisenstein, when I saw an old man with a long white beard sitting on a bank beside the road. He was a big man, and looked as though he might have been powerful at one time, and the thing that caught my especial attention was that he was crying — just sitting there all alone in the forest with the tears running silently down his face.

I pulled the car up and asked him what was the matter. He said, "There is no place in Bohemia for me more. The Russians have taken all."

They usually refer to Czechoslovakia instead of Bohemia, so that was a little odd, but I said, "Lots of people get across the border."

"How can I reach the border?" said he. "They will have it closed."

"Look here," I told him. "I'm an American businessman and my peddler's passport allows me an assistant, so you're appointed to the job. Hop in."

He climbed to his feet rather heavily, carrying a bandanna with something wrapped in it. I opened up the luggage compartment, which is in the front in a Volkswagen, told him to put his package in, and went round to the back to look at my motor, which I suspected of heating. When we were started, I said, "My name's Smith. I'd better know yours if you're working for me." He shook his head a little, said "Veles", and —

(Tobolka said: "That is not a modern name. Nobody is named that now."

("It's good Czech, isn't it?" asked Smith, a trifle belligerently.

("Mr. Cohan," said Tobolka, "you will give the gentleman some slivovitz to drink to the honor of Bohemia. Most assuredly, sir," he said to Smith, "Veles is good Czech!")

Well, I thought so, (said Smith, lifting his glass in acknowledgment to Tobolka).

Anyway, as soon as I saw the border guard station at Eisenstein, I thought the jig was up. It's a square white building at one end of a barrier like those they have for grade crossings over here, and there was a big, blond lad in a Russian uniform out in front, with one of those machine-pistols cradled in his arm. I held out my papers to him, but he never looked at them, just motioned with the machine-pistol for me to get out, and said something in Russian to the two Czech border-guards with him. And gentlemen, all I could think of was the disappearance of my contact, Ales! One of them told the two of us to stand in front of the building, while the other one

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opened up my luggage compartment and began to get the stuff out. It was then that the old fellow spoke for the first time since he got in the car. He said, "Be not troubled. You will be rewarded."

All the same, that big bruiser started going through my stuff in a way that made me plenty troubled. Pretty soon they hit my portable special. On most inspections, they'd pass it up. The Russian prodded it, and the border guard said: "Come here. He wants you to open it."

I don't know how I managed to walk over and open up the machine. The Russian looked at it, frowned, and then pointed his gun at my stomach and said something else. The guard translated it for me. "He says it has a secret compartment and you are to open that, too."

I knew they had me then, but there wasn't any chance of making a break with that gun on me, so I pressed the stud that opened up the compartment. I was never more surprised in my life, and I guess they weren't either. Instead of the documents I had put in there, the compartment was full of neatly wrapped Czech cream cakes, together with this sausage I have here.

That puzzled the hell out of my Russian friends. He wanted to know why I was carrying sausage and cream cakes out of the country in this secret way, and I couldn't think of any very good answer, except that I sometimes got hungry along the road. He turned around to yell at the other guard, the one with the old fellow. And then he got another shock, and so did I. The old guy was gone.

Well, they had a big yak about it. I don't understand more than a few words of Russian, but between what I do know and the guard's pantomime, I could get it that he was pretending he had only turned his head to watch me open up the compartment and the old fellow had vanished.

After a while the Russian gave it up and snapped something that the border guard translated for me as: "You are obviously carrying more food than you are entitled to under the rationing program of the People's Republic, and therefore your cream cakes are confiscated. But you may keep the sausage, which is named for the fascist monster Bismarck, and is no longer permitted."

The Russky apparently just didn't want sausage that day. I had to put my luggage back in the compartment, and when I crossed the border the last thing I saw was the three of them licking their fingers as they wolfed down cream cakes.

Smith mopped his hand across his brow at the memory of a harrowing experience, and said, "I will return Dr. Tobolka's compliment with the slivovitz, Mr. Cohan. Now, there's the story. I saved my skin, but I didn't

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save the reports, which doesn't matter in the case of most of them. But that one on the Prodnice installations was pretty vital. It's perfectly obvious that this old fellow Veles pulled some kind of sleight of hand performance, and exchanged the sausage and cream cakes for my documents, but the question is how did he do it and where are they now? I haven't been able to trace him, but I know professional magicians have associations and that sort of thing, and he must be in touch somewhere with other Czech magicians. That's why I want one, and I think the sausage is intended as a clue."

"Of course it was," said Dr. Tobolka. "Obviously."

"What do you mean?" asked Smith.

"Simply this: Veles is one of the oldest of our legends, far back before the time of King Krok. He watches over the forests, flocks and foods of the Bohemian people. *Foods*, Mr. Smith."

Smith choked over his slivovitz. "Come now, Dr. Tobolka!" he snorted. "You mean I was driving a hitchhiking kobold?"

"Not kobold. A god."

"Could be," Keating said. "He sure vanished into thin air, didn't he? And how about that switcheroo on the documents!"

Smith said, "Misdirection."

Suddenly, both Mr. Keating and Dr. Tobolka opened their eyes and their mouths and began to talk, alternately, like a smooth-working cross-talk team.

Keating said, "What was the Austrian name of that place where you said the map came from —"

And Tobolka said, "Wörsten. The German word for —"

"Sausages! And Veles was the god of —"

"Food!"

They both turned to Smith and Dr. Tobolka said, "Mr. Smith, the sausage is more than a clue. I'll bet anything the map is inside it — or it has some note that tells where the map is."

Smith sipped and considered. "All right. All right. It's worth trying. Got a knife, Mr. Cohan?"

Mr. Cohan rummaged under the bar and came up with an all-purpose piece of cutlery, which Smith poised over the sausage.

"Not that way," said Keating. "If the map or a note is in there, you'll cut it in half. Cut it open lengthwise."

Smith grasped the handle firmly and drew the knife through the sausage in a long, firm longitudinal cut.

The sausage separated into halves, revealing two cross-sections of pure meat, brownish-red with numerous white patches and a network of little

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white lines connecting them. Just what would be expected in a sausage of this kind. There was no note or piece of paper. Keating's face fell, Tobolka looked disappointed, but Smith goggled at the spectacle. "My God!" he said.

"What's the matter?" asked Tobolka.

"It's the map! In sausage meat! See, here are the antiaircraft positions, and the bunkers holding ammunition and the shell-loading plant, and there's the outer guard post. Those little white lines have it all."

Tobolka said: "In the Böhmerwald it is not good to be a skeptic."

Smith picked up the paper that he had earlier unwrapped from the sausage, and began to assemble it again. Halfway through this task he stared at his companions and once more mopped his brow with his hand, as though to get rid of some pressure within. He said:

"But how in God's name am I going to convince Army Intelligence that this damn thing is *it*?"

Coming . . . *in our next issue (on the stands in early September)* . . .

THE BRONZE DOOR — a curious tale of impossible murder by Raymond Chandler, an old master whose fantasies are too little known;

ATTITUDES — a fine study of psychological and spiritual values in space travel by Philip José Farmer, one of the brightest of recent discoveries;

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An old, familiar F & SF contributor, Kay Rogers, whose LETTER TO A TIGER creates the most stimulating heroine we've met in some time;

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stories by Arthur Porges, Esther Carlson, and others —

All in addition to a properly thunderous conclusion to Poul Anderson's two-part serial, THREE HEARTS AND THREE LIONS.

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"Tell me," the novice writer invariably pants as he clutches at the visiting celebrity, "where do you get your ideas?" Well, with most successful professionals the answer is pretty obvious: personal experience, extensive reading, a little black notebook, a trained imagination. But a few authors baffle us, and would probably baffle even Professor Lowes who so penetratingly showed how Coleridge took the road to Xanadu. John Collier, R. Bretnor, Esther Carlson, Alan Nelson — these creative sports have a way of regularly turning up with ideas which have no business arising in a sane and logically ordered universe. As for instance this concept of a Sound Wick, and its consequences, both charming and terrifying.

Silenzia

by ALAN NELSON

At first, I wasn't permitted to relate the story of Silenzia at all, in any form, to any person. Now, however, I have convinced the Society that no harm will come of it. People eventually will hear about Silenzia; certainly the authorized version, with names and places disguised, is better than wild stories. . . .

It started the day I decided to leave Edith. She didn't know it, of course — didn't even suspect it. But I was through.

She was a good wife, I guess, but the sounds she made! I just couldn't stand them: the harangues about my being nothing more than a shorthand teacher in a business school; the shrill laugh which was a noise like someone with long fingernails slipping off a tin roof; the constant piano playing, grim and vigorous, as though she were hacking her way through a jungle with a dull knife; the hollow *scru-r-unch-scrunch* as she scratched her haunches just before getting into bed at night.

There was a little cabin in the Siskiyou mountains, a job in a service station nearby, chipmunks for companions.

Then I found Silenzia — beautiful, wonderful Silenzia. It was in the back room at Ziggert's, a little pawn shop off Third Street, while I was looking at trunks. I reached into the bottom of an old iron-bound model and came up with an Air Wick bottle lying under some old rags. An Air

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Wick bottle, yes, but filled with something very special indeed — a milky, opalescent fluid boiling ever so gently around some coiled copper wires.

I unscrewed the lid, lifted the wick. Immediately I was surrounded with a glorious silence. The street noises, the twang of Ziggert's sales talk up front, the plink-plink of a customer testing a banjo — these sounds all disappeared completely. I pushed the wick back into the bottle. The noises returned.

Blinking, I looked at the label on the bottle. In red pencil someone had scrawled *Silenzia* over the Air Wick label. Could it possibly be, I wondered, that someone has invented a Sound Wick, and that it does to unpleasant noises what an Air Wick does to unpleasant odors?

Excitedly, I screwed the lid on, put the bottle in my vest pocket, paid Ziggert for the trunk and left.

I walked all the way home through the 5 o'clock traffic with Silenzia's wick extended and I was covered with a glorious tent of silence. Epileptic juke boxes, sirens, clanging signal lights, froggy howls of news vendors — Silenzia blotted them all out for me completely.

It was as I fumbled with my front door key that I first encountered the squat man with the anxious face and the gray homburg. He'd been puffing up the hill behind me, and now he tipped his hat and said breathlessly, "I beg your pardon, sir. My name is Emmett Dugong. It is important that I talk with you."

I was too excited to bother with peddlers and I brushed by him and went inside.

We lived in a three-story Telegraph Hill flat — a wooden soundbox — chosen by Edith for its Bohemian atmosphere which, unfortunately, crowded us closely from all sides. On our left was a xylophone player with strong wrists and a perfectionist complex who had been learning "Anitra's Dance" for seven months; on the other side, a retired cabinet maker had for three years been constructing something that required sledge hammers and an electric sanding machine; above, an insecure teen-ager was well along with a correspondence course in weight lifting; and directly below was a Mr. Snitling, forever trying to hush them all up by pounding on his ceiling with a broomstick.

My long fight with them had been a losing one. Maybe now things would be different; for today, with Silenzia, I didn't hear a thing.

I could hardly wait to try it on Edith and for fifteen minutes sat impatiently in the kitchen playing with the noises, tuning them in and out at whatever volume I fancied by pulling the wick in and out.

Finally over my shoulder I saw she'd arrived and was standing in the doorway taking off her hat. In silence I watched her lips bouncing off each

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other, arms gesticulating in seven directions, tiny facial muscles twitching — Edith was talking.

A powerful instinct warned me it would never do to let Edith know about Silenzia; unobtrusively I folded my coat over the vest pocket where the Sound Wick rested and pretended to understand what she was saying.

Ever watch someone speak without hearing what's being said? It's like listening through a plate glass window and can be a very pleasant sensation indeed. How well I could imagine the gist of her monologue: the detailed description of her afternoon ceramics class; what she told the grocery man when he tried to overcharge her; the 2,000-word exposition on how I was wasting my life at Modern Business College. As if I enjoyed working for the bald and lipless Amos C. Schmuckbinder and his pimply-faced student body!

When Edith's lips finally slowed down I wondered suddenly if my voice would reach out through the cushion of silence — whether Silenzia was unidirectional.

"Why don't you play the piano for me?" I asked.

She looked at me suspiciously, led me into the front room and began playing, attacking the keys like a clever welterweight warming up on a punching bag. Stretched out in an arm chair, I watched the performance with complete enjoyment.

"I don't think you're putting enough into your left," I said at the end of her first selection. She looked disconcerted and on the second opus almost sprained her wrist. I requested — I insisted on! — another selection, then two more, and finally after still another she was too exhausted to continue.

Dinner that night was a charming little affair; I didn't tune Edith completely out, just down low enough to catch the general drift of the conversation. How pleasant to sit there like that in the cool spring silence! How enchanting to make up my own words to fit those tireless lips moving with such fierce energy across the table from me!

I think the weeks that followed were the most satisfying of my life. Sometimes at night I'd wander through the city — the brilliant, mute city — gazing at the swarms of people and cars moving through hushed streets in soundless, swirling patterns, a fantastic ballet without music, and I'd wonder how I'd ever done without Silenzia. Sweet Silenzia . . .

Why, you may ask, if I was so sensitive to noise, didn't I puncture my ear drums long ago and be done with it? The answer is simple, of course. There were still a few things in the world very much worth listening to: the sound of oars in the water, the pop of sparkling burgundy corks, the Beethoven concertos, the sound of bacon sizzling . . .

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Sometimes I wondered vaguely if all the world's troubles were not simply noises, and that all the bloody explosions which forever rocked the world — the blasts of field artillery and atom bombs — were they not simply the accumulated sounds of a thousand petty bickerings, snotty words, and ponderous speeches from balconies, all gathered throughout the years, compressed into a single instant and detonated with a thunder that never quite died out?

Even Edith seemed different to me now. At times, sitting across the table from her, when I had her turned down low, I'd gaze at her as I did in the days long ago — at the soft brown hair, at the smile that used to make my heart jump so, and I'd tell myself possibly I wouldn't have to retreat to the mountain cabin after all.

I guess it was inevitable. I guess it happens to anyone who has too much of any one thing: power, money, silence. I became cocky, arrogant. I was like a man with a new rifle who cannot rest until he has used it — proved it on tin cans, rabbits, even human beings. I started gunning for noises, and the act of blotting them up, of *unhearing* them, as it were, gave me a glorious feeling of triumph.

I took to standing my ground as Buick convertibles tried to blast me off the pavement with prolonged explosions of their triple-tone horns.

At school I took to such petty practices as baiting my boss, Schmuckbinder, a man who loved to make speeches more than he liked to eat. I was the tortured soul upon whom he rehearsed these evil recitations.

"Hilkey, I'm guest speaker at the Rotary Friday night," he'd say, trapping me in his office. "You don't mind checking me on this for time, do you?"

Then without waiting for an answer, he'd strike out, and his words were sad and soggy, like an endless string of sour dumplings slogging down a rusty kitchen drain.

Now it was different. Now I egged him on, found ways to make him repeat each speech four times, five times, even more, until his voice croaked, until the saliva turned to glue in his mouth, while I, cozy in an arm chair, focused my eyes on the YWCA across the street where there were always a number of interesting sun-bathers lolling on the roof top.

I even took to using Silenzia on Miss McKenzie, a student in my Intermediate Stenography class, a depressingly competent girl, robust and eager, with heavy glasses and loose guitar strings for vocal chords, a girl who was forever twanging away at me over some technicality or other, raising impossible questions, starting arguments I could never hope to win because of my short temper.

"I don't know why I shouldn't have a higher grade on this," she whined

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one day handing me the previous day's shorthand speed test I'd just returned.

"I'll tell you why," I answered, glancing at the page of dashes, curlicues and looping symbols. "Allow me to read what you have written here, Miss McKenzie. According to your shorthand symbols the following is a literal translation:

"Dear Sirs:

Your letter of the 25th has been regloofered and in simping we wish to stoot that all our preefgers and boxes of bim sergles have been exhorted. However, may we steet that notwinching, the clergs and shermgaroofles, eeble crates and zimpuggle oorflumit if bill of lading.

Sincerely,"

Then I turned the Sound Wick up high and let her talk. Finally when I saw her lips stop I said, "You're absolutely reemsly."

Then I placed the paper back into her limp hand and went out humming.

That's the way it started and from then on, there was no holding me back. Edith loved loud, gay things — by God I'd give them to her! Eagerly I attended all the screwy social functions she was so fond of, dug up a few of my own. We spent a great deal of time at civic improvement lectures, benefit teas for indigent young poets, the Schmuckbinder Optimist Club lecture series. I dragged her to bowling alleys, high school commencement exercises, political rallies, amateur string quartet groups.

No longer was I the mild, soft-spoken man shrinking in the corner. Wherever there was noise, I was in the middle of it, adding to it with wild abandon, sopping it all up with Silenzia.

It was at one of these many affairs — a cocktail party, I think — that I encountered the man in the gray homburg once more. Vaguely I remembered seeing him at some of the other affairs too.

"My name is Emmett Dugong," he began. "It is important that I talk with you."

The wick was only partially extended; I could just barely hear him. I was half drunk. He looked like a bore. I didn't feel like talking about anything important. Unobtrusively, I pulled the wick out all the way, waited patiently for him to finish — raising my eyebrows every now and then to show I was listening — then drained my glass and left him.

Then one afternoon I came home to find Edith packing.

"Where are you going?" I asked, pushing Silenzia's wick in so I could hear.

"I'm leaving you, Matt," she replied, grimly.

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Well, that gave me a start. I'd grown used to Edith these past few weeks of silence; as long as I kept her turned off, I figured we might even make a go of it.

"But why, Edith?"

She had a great deal to say on that. Briefly, it was a matter of sound: the noises I made, my loud voice, my shrill laugh. I'd changed these past weeks, and all that. There was a little cabin in the mountains somewhere, a job in a restaurant nearby. She was getting out.

I decided the time had come to tell her about Silenzia. Reluctantly I launched into it but instead of placating her, my words of explanation only enraged her.

"You mean you haven't heard a word I've said this past month?" she shrilled.

Edith's words scraped unpleasantly against my nerve endings — I'd almost forgotten how much her voice reminded me of someone chewing on steel wool. Any tenderness I had been building up toward her began to evaporate.

"If you promise to get rid of that obscene little gadget," Edith was saying, "I may change my mind about leaving. But it's either that . . . that bottle, or me. You'll just have to make your choice."

Well, after Edith moved out, I went to work on the neighbors. I brought home a set of drums, a couple of tuba players. I learned to accompany the xylophone player in "Anitra's Dance" with a ship's siren.

Then after *they* moved out I began thinking of bigger things. The idea of manufacturing Sound Wicks for general distribution had occurred to me before, of course — the demand from baby sitters and music lovers alone would be tremendous. But until now, I had always revolted against commercializing. Silenzia was essentially a *secret* instrument. Mass production would be fatal for Sound Wicks. Radio advertisers, speechmakers, horn manufacturers and every other noisemonger in the world would soon find a way to counteract Silenzia's effectiveness; somehow they'd break through and lovers of quiet would have at best only a few months' respite before Sound Wicks were as dated as sachet bags.

The first man to put it on the market would, of course, make a million dollars. But why *hadn't* it been put on the market? Suppose someone were to beat me to it?

That decided me. I might be selling Silenzia down the river, but I could certainly buy a lot of peace and quiet with a million dollars.

I held Silenzia up and gazed at the bottle affectionately. Suddenly I frowned and examined it closer. Was it my imagination or had the bottle been getting warmer these past few days? And the milky fluid, was it

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boiling just a trifle harder? I shrugged — possibly I'd been overworking her a bit. Well, if I were going to be a Sound Wick tycoon, I'd better get started. The man to see was Charlie Mook, president of Engineers Associates — he'd get the contents of the bottle analyzed for me.

I put my hat on and started out the door, then stopped short. Across the street, waiting patiently, was the squat man with the gray homburg. Damned little guy was beginning to get on my nerves. I didn't have time to talk to him now. I came inside, left through the rear door.

C. J. Mook was a tall, thin man who seldom spoke and then without moving a muscle in his face. His trousers bagged at the knees so badly that whenever he stood, he appeared always on the verge of a tremendous leap.

I told him my story and allowed him to examine Silenzia. He sat there a few minutes playing with the noises and getting very excited over it; one corner of his mouth twitched and a single bead of perspiration appeared on his left eyebrow. He didn't want to analyze it; he wanted to buy it.

"Give you $100,000 for it. As is," he said, drawing out a check book. "$200,000 then."

I laughed at him.

"Look, man!" he cried. "I want it for myself. I've got four kids age two to eleven. They have toys. They listen to radio programs. They have friends who play at my house. Besides, there's an Irish tenor right across the hall. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

I laughed it off again.

Well, it finally turned out I couldn't have it analyzed right then; their head research engineer was away for a week and Mook begged me to leave the Sound Wick until he got back. He'd take such excellent care of it! Once more I laughed at him. I'd return in a week; meantime I had factory sites to look for.

I sauntered home that afternoon with my feet scarcely touching the pavement. What a wonderful world! What a wonderful Sound Wick! Nothing could happen now to spoil my happiness. Nothing!

But something *did* happen. It was a shot, and the slug bit into the brick building beside me, kicking up a small spray of red dust just six inches from my head. I ducked, looked around wildly — just in time to see a squat figure in a gray homburg scuttle around the far corner.

When I reached home my nerves were thoroughly unstrung. Who *was* the little man who'd been following me around and why should he want to kill me now? If only I'd listened to him before. For almost an hour I paced the floor trying to figure it out.

Then I felt a warmth against my chest. I removed Silenzia, looked at her and was seized by a new fear. Something was very *definitely* wrong with

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Silenzia. She was badly overheated, there was a perceptible buzzing, and when I unscrewed the cap a slight hiss leaked out as though some kind of internal pressure were building up.

I had never stopped to consider what happened to all the noises Silenzia swallowed — could it be there was a saturation point?

The next two days were completely miserable ones. First I was still edgy about the shot, and second I was really concerned about Silenzia's condition. Now she seemed better, now worse. Thinking perhaps rest was what she needed I left her at home all day now, wrapped in cold cloths in a dark and silent closet.

Even aside from these worries, I was completely lost without the little bottle; for Silenzia was like alcohol or opium: you used it all the time or not at all, and now my nerve endings felt raw and peeled back and the slightest sound made me jump.

It was at dusk on the third evening that another attempt was made on my life. I had just stepped off the curb at Stockton and Greenwich when a large black sedan swerved out of nowhere, bore down on me with tires screaming. The fender just grazed my trousers as I lunged for safety. From the pavement where I lay I caught sight of the driver as he careened around the corner — he wore a gray homburg.

I was still shaking when I climbed the two flights of stairs. My mind was made up: I'd sell Silenzia to Charlie Mook for $200,000, and get out of the city for a while.

I reached into the closet and brought the Sound Wick into the kitchen. Now I was *really* alarmed. The bubbling and sizzling were louder, more ominous, a slimy froth dribbled out from the edges of the cap and the bottle was almost too hot to hold. I scurried for ice cubes, got blankets to protect her from stray street noises, loosened the cap to allow pressure to escape. An ugly rumble erupted as I unscrewed it. Tiny jets of fluid spat upward.

It was at this point the accordionist started. He was a new neighbor and he went from "Over the Waves" to "La Paloma" and back again with a piercing whine that raised the hackles on my neck. With each squeaky blast, Silenzia sputtered more desperately.

I guess I lost my head. I rushed across the hall, pounded on the man's door, demanded he stop playing instantly. We had a terrible argument — shouts, threats — and by the time I got him hushed up and had returned to my apartment, I heard something that chilled me to the bone.

". . . *why can't you make something of yourself!*" Edith's voice coasted out of the kitchen at me, tinny and distorted like an old phonograph record. "*You're just wasting yourself working for Amos Schmuckbinder. . . .*"

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I rushed into the room. There was no one there. No one.

"*Scru-r-unch-scrunch.*" I looked at the Sound Wick on the table. Could it possibly be?

"*Get off the street you damned jay walker!*" the bottle shrieked at me. There was a screech of brakes, a claxon horn, the ping of signal lights, a clashing of gears. Another voice faded in — Schmuckbinder's:

"*. . . it is a signal honor to be with this distinguished group this evening, paying tribute to the ideals, the dreams and hopes of . . .*"

"*Scru-r-unch-scrunch . . .*"

"*You take the whites of two eggs, mix them with . . .*"

Horrified I seized the cap and tried to screw it back on the stricken bottle. Some of the hot liquid spurted out and landed on my coat. An ugly burble of sound oozed out of the spot on my sleeve.

"*. . . and in simping we wish to stoot that all our preefgers and . . .*"

With brute strength I forced the cap back on. The noise was muffled but still leaked out. But I couldn't keep the cap on; the whole interior of the bottle churned more violently than ever, and the wick swelled and thrashed like a strangulated tongue. Once more I removed the cap.

The tinny notes of "Anitra's Dance" roared out, along with the sound of billing machines and typewriters which buzzed and clacked like a closet full of insane geese. Most revolting of all was the intermittent blare of my own voice — a silly, high-pitched sound, squeaky and insistent.

I simply couldn't stand another minute of it. I looked around wildly for my hat.

"*. . . you mean you haven't heard a word I've said this past month?*" Edith's voice leapt out at me as I closed the front door.

On the first landing I pulled up short. Directly across the street, in the shadows of a deserted alley glowed a single cigarette. Gray Homburg again! Waiting for me. I returned to the bedlam inside, grabbed the phone and dialed Charlie Mook's number.

"Where in thunder are you calling from?" he demanded. "Sounds like the middle of Times Square."

"It's Silenzia," I shouted. "She's vomiting up every noise she ever swallowed."

Charlie listened to the racket a moment.

"You've evidently overworked it," he finally stutterd. "Just keep cool."

"Cool!" I screamed. "This could keep up another month or so. And when I try to put the cap on, it looks like it's about to explode. I'm going to throw it out the window."

"Don't do that!" he implored.

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"Well, do something then!"

He thought a moment.

"Look," he said, "Get your car. Pick me up in ten minutes. Bring the Sound Wick. We'll take it down to the lab. Maybe we can figure something out."

He hung up. I hesitated a moment, thinking about Gray Homburg. Maybe I could sneak out the back again.

". . . *you get rid of that obscene little gadget immediately* . . ." Edith's voice shrieked as I crept down the back stairs in utter blackness.

"*Scru-r-unch-scrunch* . . ." as I pushed open the rear door.

"*Mr. Chairman, Mr. Principal, members of the graduating class, parents, teachers, friends, and fellow students* . . ." an adolescent voice whined as I crept across the backyard.

"*I'LLLLL taaaaake yeeeou HOME again, Kaaaaathleeeeen* . . ." came an Irish tenor as I climbed the back fence.

In the car I just had to force the cap back on Silenzia — a cocktail party was coming on the air and Gray Homburg would be able to follow that sound three blocks. Then I laid the bottle on the seat beside me, stepped on the starter and roared away.

I looked in the rear view mirror. Another car, large and black, pulled out from the curb. I turned the corner at Grant. The car turned. After two more blocks, there was no doubt of it — I was being followed.

How long I dodged and turned through the night streets, I'll never know. I remember that at last I found myself on a lonely mountain road which bordered the ocean. I remember only my deep despair which grew deeper with every passing second. I was frightened, yes. Frightened of the man relentlessly following me. Frightened of the bottle which verged on explosion at any moment. But above all was the terrifying prospect of life without Silenzia.

I wouldn't have her much longer. There was no doubt about that. Charlie couldn't help her. No one could. She was too far gone. Bitterly I heaped curses on myself for squandering Silenzia the way I had, frittering her life away on xylophones and cocktail parties.

I glanced down. Silenzia was so hot the seat cover was beginning to smolder. An evil phosphorescent glow flickered inside. The metal cap bulged with the ever-increasing internal pressure. A low ominous growl fairly shook the whole bottle.

It was only a matter of seconds now, I knew, before the whole thing went up. Quickly I pulled to the side of the road, removed my coat, wrapped Silenzia in it, gingerly carried it across the road to the cliff's edge which dropped away a hundred feet to the ocean below. From within

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the throbbing bottle, a muffled, distorted voice oozed out. I held it closer to my ear:

". . . *my name is Emmett Dugong . . . important that I talk to you . . .*"

It was the voice of the man in the gray homburg. A convulsive shudder passed through the bottle. Unless I tossed the thing off the cliff this very moment, I would be blown to bits — yet I had to listen.

". . . *must return the Sound Wick to me, sir . . . No other way, sir. You'll never be able to retain it, sir. Never . . . We will go to any lengths to keep it from . . .*"

A hideous gurgling drowned out his voice a moment. The heat from the bottle singed my hair as I drew closer. The voice returned:

". . . *actually belongs to the Society . . . have commissioned me to track the lost instrument . . . I had traced it to the pawn shop before you stumbled on it . . . must be returned . . .*"

I couldn't hold on to the thing any longer. My coat was beginning to smolder. Once more I leaned over the guard rail to drop it. Once more I hesitated.

". . . *simply cannot allow a single Sound Wick to fall into the hands of anyone outside the Society . . . danger of misuse . . . danger of commercialization . . . danger of . . . danger . . .*"

The bottle gave a convulsive jerk. My smoldering coat leapt into flames. I dropped the bottle. There was a moment of dead silence as it plunged downward.

Then came the explosion.

Is it possible to imagine a blast which rips the air apart with whistles, barking dogs, taxi horns, clinking glasses, sirens, alarm clocks and the roar of a thousand laughing, shouting, mumbling voices? That is what it was. And even after the echo of it died away, I leaned numbly at the rail, staring down into blackness, weary and sick at heart.

Finally I tore myself away and turned. A short, squat man blocked my path — a man in a gray homburg.

"My name is Emmett Dugong," he said. "It is important that I talk with you."

There is little more I am permitted to say about Sound Wicks at the moment, except that my anguish at losing Silenzia has been tempered with the knowledge it was not the only one in existence — there are one thousand eight hundred and seventy-six to be exact, all issued and controlled by the International Silence Lovers Society.

But I *must* not say more; my probationary membership is on shaky enough basis as it is. In another three years, after the complete indoctrina-

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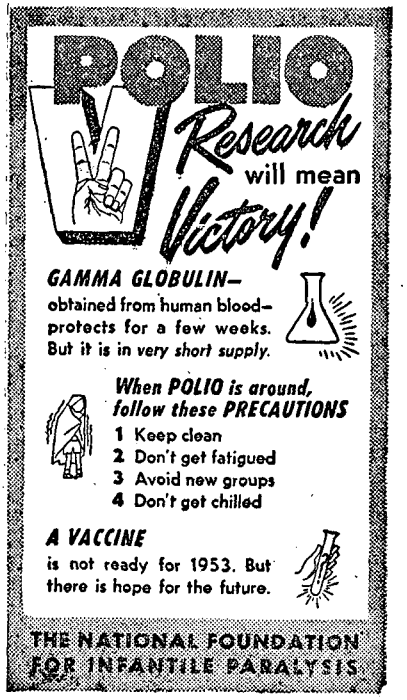
tion and instruction period, if things go well, I should be a full-fledged member with a registered Sound Wick assigned to my exclusive use.

How can you too obtain membership? Unfortunately I am not permitted to answer that either. No society was ever more exclusive, more dedicated to the protection of silence. No society ever culled its prospective members more carefully, guarded its device more fanatically. I, of course, was forced upon them — they had to take me. I am still watched, naturally, by a man with a gray homburg and anxious face and I should be killed in cold blood were I again to attempt the commercialization of Sound Wicks.

No, I cannot tell you how to join. If you're lucky, you will be approached. Watch for a happy-looking man, a man with a slight bulge in his vest pocket, a man who sometimes hears what you say and sometimes doesn't. Watch for a silent man. . . .



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The Available Data on the Worp Reaction

by LION MILLER

Being an excerpt from Prolegomena To A Preliminary Research On Some Instances Of Unique Anomalies, *by Alma Victoria Snyder-Gray, Sc.D. Fort, Indiana: Fort College Press, 2222.*

THE EARLIEST confirmed data on Aldous Worp, infant, indicates that, while apparently normal in most physical respects, he was definitely considered by neighbors, playmates, and family as a hopeless idiot. We know, too, that he was a quiet child, of extremely sedentary habits. The only sound he was ever heard to utter was a shrill monosyllable, closely akin to the expression "Whee!" and this only when summoned to meals or, less often, when his enigmatic interest was aroused by an external stimulus, such as an odd-shaped pebble, a stick, or one of his own knuckles.

Suddenly this child abandoned his accustomed inactivity. Shortly after reaching his sixth birthday — the time is unfortunately only approximate — Aldous Worp began a series of exploratory trips to the city dump which was located to the rear of the Worp premises.

After a few of these tours, the lad returned to his home one afternoon dragging a large cogwheel. After lengthy deliberation, he secreted said wheel within an unused chicken coop.

Thus began a project that did not end for nearly twenty years. Young Worp progressed through childhood, boyhood and young manhood, transferring thousands of metal objects, large and small, of nearly every description, from the dump to the coop. Since any sort of formal schooling was apparently beyond his mental capacity, his parents were pleased by the activity that kept Aldous happy and content. Presumably they did not trouble themselves with the esthetic problems involved.

As suddenly as he had begun it, Aldous Worp abandoned his self-imposed task. For nearly a year — again, the time is approximate due to insufficient data — Aldous Worp remained within the confines of the Worp property. When not occupied with such basic bodily needs as eating and sleeping, he

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moved slowly about his pile of debris with no apparent plan or purpose.

One morning he was observed by his father (as we are told by the latter) to be selecting certain objects from the pile and fitting them together.

It should be noted here, I think, that no account of the Worp Reaction can be complete without certain direct quotations from Aldous' father, Lambert Simnel Worp. Concerning the aforementioned framework the elder Worp has said, "The thing that got me, was every (deleted) piece he picked up fit with some other (deleted) piece. Didn't make no (deleted) difference if it was a (deleted) bedspring or a (deleted) busted egg beater, if the (deleted) kid stuck it on another (deleted) part, it stayed there."

Concerning usage of tools by Aldous Worp, L. S. Worp has deposed: "No tools."

A lengthier addendum is offered us by L. S. Worp in reply to a query which I quote direct: "How in God's name did he manage to cause separate parts to adhere to each other to make a whole?" (Dr. Palmer) *A.* "The (deleted) stuff went together tighter'n a mallard's (deleted), and nobody — but *nobody*, Mister, could get 'em apart."

It was obviously quite stable, since young Aldous frequently clambered into the maze to add another "part," without disturbing its equilibrium in the slightest.

The foregoing, however sketchy, is all the background we have to the climactic experiment itself. For an exact report of the circumstances attendant upon the one "controlled" demonstration of the Worp Reaction we are indebted to Major Herbert R. Armstrong, U. S. Army Engineers, and Dr. Philip H. Eustace Cross, A. E. C., who were present.

It seems that, at exactly 10:46 A.M., Aldous Worp picked up a very old and very rusty cogwheel . . . the very first object he had retrieved from oblivion on the junk-pile, so long ago when he was but a tad of six. After a moment's hesitation, he climbed to the top of his jerry-built structure, paused, then lowered himself into its depths. He disappeared from the sight of these trained observers for several minutes. (Dr. Cross: 4 min., 59 sec. Maj. Armstrong: 5 min., 02 sec.) Finally Aldous reappeared, climbed down and stared fixedly at his creation.

We now quote from the combined reports of Maj. Armstrong and Dr. Cross: "After standing dazed-like for a few minutes, Worp finally came very close to his assembly. There was a rod sticking out with the brass ball of a bedpost fastened to it. Aldous Worp gave this a slight tug. What happened then was utterly fantastic. First, we heard a rushing sound, something like a waterfall. This sound grew appreciably louder and, in about fifteen seconds, we saw a purplish glow emanate from *beneath* the contraption. Then, the whole congeries of rubbish arose into the air for a height of about

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three meters and hung there, immobile. The lad Aldous jumped around with every semblance of glee and we distinctly heard him remark 'Whee!' three times. Then he went to one side of the phenomenon, reached down and turned over the rusty wheel of a coffee mill and his 'machine' slowly settled to earth."

There was, of course, considerable excitement. Representatives of the Armed Services, the Press Services, the A. E. C., various Schools for Advanced Studies, *et al.* arrived in droves. Communication with Aldous Worp was impossible since the young man had never learned to talk. L. S. Worp, however profane, was an earnest and sincere gentleman, anxious to be of service to his country; but the above quotations from his conversations will indicate how little light he was able to shed on the problem. Efforts to look inside the structure availed little, since the closest and most detailed analysis could elicit no other working hypothesis than "it's all nothing but a bunch of junk" (Dr. Palmer). Further, young Worp obviously resented such investigations.

However, he took great delight in operating his machine and repeatedly demonstrated the "reaction" to all beholders.

The most exhaustive tests, Geiger, electronic, Weisendonk, litmus, *et al.* revealed nothing.

Finally, the importunities of the press could no longer be denied and early in the afternoon of the second day, telecasters arrived on the scene.

Aldous Worp surveyed them for a moment, then brought his invention back to earth. With a set look on his face, he climbed to its top, clambered down into its bowels and, in due course, reappeared with the ancient cog-wheel. This he carefully placed in its original resting place in the chicken coop. Systematically, and in order of installation, he removed each part from his structure and carefully returned it to its original place in the original heap by the chicken coop.

Today, the component parts of the whole that was Worp's Reaction are scattered. For, silently ignoring the almost hysterical pleas of the men of science and of the military, Aldous Worp, after dismantling his machine completely and piling all parts in and over the chicken coop, then took upon himself the onerous task of transporting them, one by one, back to their original place in the city dump.

Now, unmoved by an occasional berating by L. S. Worp, silent before an infrequent official interrogation, Aldous Worp sits on a box in the back yard of his ancestral home, gazing serenely out over the city dump. Once in a very great while his eyes light up for a moment and he says "Whee!" very quietly.

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A quietly grim story calculated to make the most enthusiastic ailurophile sleep ill of nights.

Mrs. Dalrymple's Cat

by CHRISTOPHER WOOD

IT REALLY WASN'T my affair, I'd only taken the cottage next door for a month during the summer. Mrs. Dalrymple meant nothing to me. I don't see what more I could have done. And yet I blame myself. . . .

I first became aware of her a few days after I had moved in. "Kitty, kitty, kitty . . ." I heard in a high-pitched singsong from the next garden. Looking out of the window I saw a fine black cat absorbed in stalking a bird on my lawn. "Kitty, kitty, kitty. . . ." The cat, no doubt, was used to it. But I found the sound distracting. I went into the garden. "Come, pussy," I said, approaching it with the intention, after friendly relations had been established, of returning it to its owner. But the cat eluded me and, as I followed, turned and considered me carefully, raising a warning paw and spitting slightly as I drew near. I stopped. In its luminous eyes there was more than a touch of disdain.

"You mustn't mind Tom," a voice said from over the fence, "he's absolutely devoted to me . . . such a sweet pussy. But he's always difficult with strangers."

I turned. An intense little face with large dark eyes, rather unhealthy complexion, and wispy gray hair was regarding me over the fence. She was small, primly dressed, and might have been any age over 50.

"I'm Hester Dalrymple," she continued, "Mrs. Dalrymple. I see we're to be neighbors."

"How do you do?" I said. "My name is Pringle."

"How nice! You really must come to tea one day and be properly introduced to Tom. Let me see . . . could you come Thursday?"

My heart sank. I began to mumble an excuse.

"Well . . . how about Friday?"

It was no use. Much against my will I promised to go to tea with Mrs. Dalrymple . . . and Tom.

At half-past 4 I presented myself punctually, anxious to get it over with.

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The sitting room was large and had French windows opening on to the garden. Although too full of bric-à-brac it was comfortable. Near the window stood a grand piano ("Tom's favorite seat"). The tea was excellent. Presently, the cat entered from the garden.

"Ah, here's Tom. Come pussy, and be introduced to Mr. Pringle."

Thus bidden the cat was gracious enough to permit me to stroke it. Mrs. Dalrymple was delighted. "See, he approves of you," she said as she poured a large bowl of milk for Tom.

By the time we had finished tea Mrs. Dalrymple was well launched on the history of her life, and I was awaiting my chance to escape.

"Yes, I don't know what I should have done when I lost my dear husband if it hadn't been for Tom. Such a wonderful companion! Here pussy, come and sit on mother's lap."

She picked the cat up off the piano and placed it on her lap. "Sweet pussy," she said, and kissed it. It wrinkled its nose in disgust, and got down. "Now pussy, don't be so unkind. He's only showing off for your benefit." Recapturing it she held it pressed onto her lap.

It was time for me to go. I was about to get up when my attention was arrested by my hostess's peculiar behavior. She was making odd little cooing noises, and she seemed to have forgotten that I was there. As she rocked to and fro she would kiss the cat on the top of its head with a curious precision, as though to say: "Pussy, you're mine . . . mine . . . mine." The cat's eyes were glaring, and it was straining to escape. Presently it began to complain in its strange cat voice; and then to growl. I sat fascinated, but uneasy. Something was building up; I'd had the same feeling before a thunderstorm. The old woman was spilling over with her obsessional, even sadistic love, while the cat became more outraged and furious each second. The tension mounted as Mrs. Dalrymple crouched lower over the cat till, after a squeeze which caused its growl to rise to a scream, she suddenly sat up straight, passed a hand over her hair, and said, as though waking from a dream, "What was that?"

The cat fled into the garden. I also had had more than enough.

"Well, I must be going. It's been so nice," I said, and I made up my mind never to enter the house again.

I would have soon forgotten Mrs. Dalrymple and her cat but for the latter's unfortunate habit of yowling at night. One of the French windows was left ajar so that it could wander in and out as it pleased. My bedroom window faced in that direction. Seemingly it pleased the cat to wait until I fell asleep, and then arouse me with a long-drawn-out scream. I kept a jug of water handy, but Tom was always too quick for me.

A week after the tea party Mrs. Dalrymple and I came face to face.

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"Good morning! What magnificent lungs Tom has!"

"Don't tell me he's been serenading you! Ah well, cats will be cats," she said archly. "I'm very sorry he's disturbed you. I'm sure I've never had any complaints before."

"Perhaps Tom doesn't like me!"

"What nonsense! Of course he does. I'm a heavy sleeper . . . ," she broke off uncertainly.

I relented. "Don't give it another thought. But if I may say so, you don't look as though you'd been sleeping very well."

"I've had a few nightmares lately. Most unusual for me. I think I'll go and see Doctor Orcutt. Such a sympathetic man!"

For some nights I was spared Tom's caterwauling, and I slept beautifully. Then one night I was wrenched out of sleep by a piercing yowl — or so I imagined, for the sound was not repeated. It was a very still night. Cross and restless, unable to get back to sleep, I decided to take a turn in the garden. Putting on my dressing gown I went down and out onto the lawn. I walked to the fence and stood looking over it. Clouds over the moon made it difficult to see clearly, and I was turning away when my eye caught a movement on Mrs. Dalrymple's lawn. I could just make out Tom running rapidly into her sitting room, apparently in pursuit of some quarry. I heard from inside a faint scuffling, and Tom crooning in a honeyed voice. I would have loved to spoil his fun. And when there came a faint squeal of distress I had a mad urge to go and rescue the little beast Tom was bullying. Fortunately there was nothing more to be heard, and after a few minutes I went back to bed, feeling oddly futile.

Next afternoon Mrs. Dalrymple was at work in her garden. Rather to my own surprise I called to her.

"How are you, Mrs. Dalrymple? Not been having any more of those nightmares, I hope."

"Thank you," she said, coming towards me, limping slightly. "To tell the truth I had a bad one last night. But I went to see the doctor this morning, and he said I'm just overtired. He gave me a tonic."

"That ought to put you right. But I'm afraid you've hurt your leg."

"That's nothing, thanks, just a bruise. But I don't know how I did it. Perhaps I've taken to walking in my sleep again. I used to as a child."

After a few minutes I excused myself. I hate becoming involved with people, and I found that I was beginning to feel concerned about Mrs. Dalrymple.

A few nights later the moon was full, and it was so beautiful in the garden that I strolled up and down for a long time before going to bed. Pleasantly tired I fell asleep at once. But the next moment — so it seemed to me,

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though my watch told me I'd slept for more than three hours — I was wide awake with all my senses alert. Something was wrong. I didn't know what, but I had an impression of having been urgently summoned. It was not pleasant. This time it wasn't a question of Tom's voice. It was rather as though somewhere an alarm had sounded. I shivered slightly, though the night was warm. There was nothing to be heard, nothing seemed to be out of place in the room.

On an impulse I went downstairs, picked up a flashlight and went outside. As I reached the garden I heard what I took to be a cry of distress from the other house. It was because I wasn't absolutely certain the voice was animal that I dared to creep to the French windows of Mrs. Dalrymple's sitting room. There I paused uneasily.

From within came a scuffling noise; then, a curious high squeaking which, though there was something familiar about it, didn't quite sound like a mouse, or a bird. I was about to open the door and use my flashlight when I realized that the moon was shining directly into the room. If I were very quiet I might be able to catch Tom unawares, and there would be enough light to see what he was up to. I eased the door open. There was Tom, plainly visible, teasing some little animal by the piano. He was smacking it quite hard, though I don't think his claws were out. He wasn't ready for the kill; he was having too much fun. Suddenly I was disgusted. I was about to intervene when the little creature, hitherto screened by Tom's back, darted full into the moonlight, and I saw what it was.

I blinked and looked again, praying to have been mistaken. For "it" was Mrs. Dalrymple. I stared at her face; the rest of her seemed to be entirely covered by closely fitting black tights. And she was the size of a large mouse. There was no mistaking her face as the moonlight fell full upon it. Her tiny eyes were darting this way and that, and it was she who was making those piteous half-human squeals. It was appalling — and it was unbelievable. It cannot have been for more than a second or two that I stood there paralyzed. Then I screamed, and threw the flashlight at Tom. It didn't hit him, but he fled past me into the garden. And Mrs. Dalrymple — or whatever monstrosity it was — disappeared. I didn't see her go. But the carpet was now empty.

I stood hesitating, feeling sick. Then I heard a faint scream from upstairs. I ran up. Her moaning voice led me to her bedroom, and I opened the door. "Mrs. Dalrymple," I cried, thinking quickly, "are you all right? It's I, Mr. Pringle. I . . . I thought I heard a burglar and I came over to see. There wasn't anyone there, but I stupidly dropped my flashlight. I'm afraid I must have awakened you. And given you a fright. I'm so sorry."

Mrs. Dalrymple was breathing rapidly and stertorously, as though she

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had been running. She seemed dazed. "Mr. Pringle, it's you, is it. I've just had such an awful nightmare . . . thank you, thank you . . . but now I'm awake I'll be quite all right."

I mumbled a few words and almost ran out of the room. I was all in. I just wanted to go to sleep, and forget.

The next day found me utterly confused. Something was very wrong next door. Mrs. Dalrymple might even be in danger. Something ought to be done about it. But — a big but — people don't shrink and turn into mice. Not in my world. Any suggestion of the supernatural makes me most uncomfortable.

Late in the morning I saw Mrs. Dalrymple in the garden. I didn't feel any better when I saw that she was limping badly.

"I was just coming over to ask how you were," I called.

As she hobbled over I noticed, to my dismay, a large bruise on her arm.

"I do feel rather wretched. I think I really *must* have been walking in my sleep last night. I'm expecting the doctor any moment. It was *most* kind of you to come over last night. I expect what you heard was just Tom up to some of his pranks. I was very glad you woke me up. It's funny, but I haven't the least idea what that horrid nightmare was about."

"Perhaps you ought to go away for a change."

"Oh no, I couldn't do that. I couldn't leave Tom."

"I'd look after him for you. I'd be glad to." And I began to play with the idea of Tom's death.

"Thank you very much. But no, I couldn't."

I tried once again. "I have heard that for some people cats are unhealthy. A question of allergy to the fur . . ."

"What an unkind thing to say! What would poor Tom do without me? Kitty, kitty, kitty . . ."

Tom came prancing up, purring in a nauseating manner.

"Dear pussy!" she said. "There's the doctor now. I must go in if you'll excuse me."

She was a stupid obstinate woman. Why should I care what happened to her? But by the afternoon I began to see that I should have no peace till I had done something. As I paced up and down my eye fell on the rifle I had brought on the off-chance of a little shooting in the hills. Supposing I were to aim at a bird — and hit Tom by mistake? Wouldn't that solve everything? I carried the rifle outside.

Tom was asleep on the lawn. I levelled the gun at him and was about to pull the trigger when Mrs. Dalrymple came rushing out of the house and snatched him up.

"Mr. Pringle! I couldn't have believed it! That a man like you should

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even *think* of such a cruel, wicked act. Why should you want to kill a poor innocent animal that never did you any harm! Tom — darling Tom! Thank God I arrived in time!"

It was more than I could stand. The asinine woman! With as much dignity as I could muster I retreated, leaving Mrs. Dalrymple muttering indignantly and lavishing kisses on the cat.

The situation had become impossible. On thinking it over I even found my own behavior hysterical. But for what I did I can offer no excuse. I managed to persuade myself of what I wished to believe — that what I'd seen was my imagination. Thus I permitted myself to give up the remainder of my short lease, and return home.

That should have been the end of the story. But about a year later, by which time it was only a dim memory, chance caused me to drive through the village, and I discovered an itch of curiosity. What had happened to Mrs. Dalrymple? Enough time had elapsed to have soothed the most ruffled feelings, and I *was* curious. I stopped the car, and rang her bell.

The door was opened by a faded woman of about 40.

"Is Mrs. Dalrymple at home," I asked. "I just called to ask how she was. I used to be her neighbor."

She looked a little shocked. "Oh . . . I'm afraid you haven't heard. But do come in and I'll explain." She started to lead me to the sitting room. "I'm Mrs. Dalrymple's cousin, Miss Lillywhite, and I live here now . . . with Tom, that is. I'm afraid poor Mrs. Dalrymple died a few months ago, rather suddenly."

"Oh, I *am* sorry," I said. "My name is Pringle, and I had the cottage next door last summer. Won't you tell me what happened? I liked her so much," I concluded untruthfully.

The sitting room looked exactly the same. And there was Tom asleep on the piano.

"Yes," Miss Lillywhite said, "it was very tragic. You see she was discovered one morning by the sitting room door quite dead . . . and she was horribly scratched."

"Scratched," I echoed. "Could it have been the cat?"

"Heavens no! They were great big scratches . . . oh it was awful! Why the coroner said they looked as though they had been inflicted by a tiger, and an outsize specimen at that. Which of course was absurd."

I didn't like that. "What did they decide in the end?" I asked.

"No explanation could be found. They just had to say that there was no evidence to show how the injuries were inflicted." She dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief, and sniffed a little.

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"How dreadful!" I said. I looked at Tom, who was beginning to wake up. Miss Lillywhite was continuing:

"You must have known how fond she was of Tom. Well, when her will was read it was found that she had left all her money to a home for cats, except for a very generous provision for Tom as long as he lives. And I was to have this house on condition that I shared it with Tom, and took the greatest care of him."

Miss Lillywhite's face was inscrutable; of what she really thought about it all I've no idea. But Tom was another matter. He rose lazily, and stretched himself. He was sleek, and getting rather fat. He looked down at me from the top of the piano with all the air of one whose most extravagant dreams have come true. There was no hostility in his glance; as an adversary I was beneath contempt. He'd got what he wanted. He owned the house, he owned Miss Lillywhite. Miss Lillywhite . . . how did he view Miss Lillywhite? It was none of my business — definitely none. "Where ignorance is bliss . . ." I must get out of there as quickly as possible.

"Thank you, Miss Lillywhite," I said as I stood up, "for asking me in and telling me all about poor Mrs. Dalrymple. It was most kind of you. And now I must be going."

It was as she stretched out her arm to shake my hand that the sleeve of her dress pulled back, and I saw the bruise on her arm.

You'll Find Them All in F&SF

As part of our policy of bringing you the best in modern science-fantasy, we want to publish every interesting writer in the field, from the best-established Old Space Hands to the most promising new performers. Last month we presented the first F&SF appearances of Fredric Brown and Eando Binder; this month you'll find our first Peter Phillips; and in issues to come you'll read exciting new stories from other writers who haven't appeared here before: Robert Abernathy, Charles Beaumont, Robert Bloch, Roger Dee, Andre Norton, Clifford D. Simak, and Robert Moore Williams. It's our intention to publish the writers *you* want; and if your favorite author hasn't turned up in these pages, let us know, and we'll make every effort to bring you something by him soon.

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With the possible exception of Black Mask, *there was no better detective magazine, in the old days of pulp greatness, than* Flynn's, *later* Detective Fiction Weekly. *And with no exception, there was nothing more joyous in* DFW *than Richard Sale's series of Captain McGrail stories. McGrail is a grizzled veteran of Homicide, N. Y. P. D., who seemingly never encountered a simple rational case. Every dossier from the McGrail files (you may remember* Perseus Had a Helmet, *in the first issue of F&SF) teeters on the precise balance-point between everyday homicide and pure fantasy; there are always two solutions and you can take your pick. We somehow doubt, however, if even our most skeptical readers would take the chance of putting themselves behind the singularly accursed eight-ball here described.*

The Old Oaken Eight-Ball

by RICHARD SALE

So, LIKE the Greeks bearing gifts, I wandered into the office fronted by the little door marked PRIVATE — HOMICIDE BUREAU, carrying my quart of pistachio ice cream with two paper plates, two wooden spoons, and two napkins, and I found Captain McGrail working earnestly on a problem.

The problem was how to sleep comfortably in a sway-back chair with your feet on the desk and your head lolling continually into your lap and snapping you awake again. I will say this for the good captain, he was really trying. He would groan when his neck snapped and come to for a moment to shift slightly, but not once would he give an inch to the discomfort by opening his eyes.

Thus I was able to place the end of a match between the sole and upper part of his right shoe and donate to him a splendid hotfoot which brought him out of the chair and his snooze with the greatest of ease and with green fire shooting out of his eyes.

"So!" he bellowed. "How the hell did you get in here? Who are you? What do you want? And scram!"

"Why, captain," I said, "don't you recognize me after all these years? I am he who comes to write to thee."

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"Wait a minute," Captain McGrail growled. "Your face is familiar. I've seen it some place. I never forget a face. And I'll never forget a hotfoot, either, understand? I ought to throw you in the jug for criminal assault, busting in and burning me when I was working —"

"Sleep is the nectar of the gods," I said, "and the meat of Captain McGrail."

He looked nonplussed. "I wasn't sleeping. I was thinking about a case. I always look like I'm asleep when I'm thinking out angles."

"And you're always thinking out angles," I said. "Okay, I won't spill it to the commissioner. But some day he'll walk in, and then what'll you do? Anyway, there's the bribe on the desk. Grab your spoon and your plate and your bib, and let's go." I gave out a wide smile.

"I thought I recognized you," he said gruffly. He acted huffy. "You're that fresh kid who works for the New York *Chronicle* and writes all my experiences free of charge. Nix, sonny. No more stuff from me. I was talking to a literary agent and he said I was a dope to give these yarns to you. He said I should write them myself and make a lot of money."

"Can you write?" I said. "I mean, besides making *x*'s. I understood you had trouble signing your name. You can handle everything but the vowels and the consonants."

"Yeah?" He peered at me sharply. "Something tells me you're pulling my leg."

"Your wooden one," I said. "Well, if you won't talk, you won't talk. I guess I'll have to take my quart of ice cream and go home and make up one of your homicidal fairy tales myself."

"Ice cream," he murmured, licking his chops. "And it is kind of hot in here, ain't it. What kind?"

"Pistachio."

"Well," he growled. "I hate pistachio ice cream myself. But I wouldn't want you to get fired, sonny, for not getting a story, so I'll sit back and tell you one and help you eat this vile green stuff."

"Gee, thanks, captain," I said acidly. "And there's a spoon there. You don't have to grab at it with your fingers. All right, time-killer, I want the story on this wooden pocket pool ball you've got on your desk. I noticed you never put it directly in front of you. It's always in either one of the corners of your desk. I also notice it's an eight-ball. How about it? Is there a story in it?"

"A story in it?" said Captain McGrail as he devoured pistachio ice cream with such avidity that he stained his mustache green. "I'll say there's a story in it. I was saving it for my memoirs, but I guess maybe this would be a good time to tell all. I put it in the corners, because I wouldn't want

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to be sitting behind an eight-ball. Especially not that eight-ball. That baby ain't ivory, you know. That's an oaken eight-ball and it's got a curse on it. Yep, sonny, you sit behind that eight-ball, and I'll call up Woodlawn and offer them a flat price for a coffin and plot, and take care of all the details for you."

"All right," I said wearily. "But first give out the horrible details so that I can get some idea what you're talking about. And wipe your chin."

He wiped his chin, glowered at me once, glanced at the eight-ball, a perfect sphere, black with the white circle marked 8, but made of wood instead of ivory, and he began.

He telephoned me right here one day (said Captain McGrail) and he said to me: "My name is Titus Moozie and you'd better come up and see me."

Titus Moozie lived on West 9th Street over the Moozie Pool Rooms. It wasn't a particularly bad joint, no worse than most and better than some, and he kept it pretty respectable, because he not only drew the local toughs in for pool and billiards, but of an evening, the wacks of the Village, who are neither artists nor writers but pose as such, to shoot a little, in their own screwy way.

Titus was an average little bird. He had been through high school, he had a pretty good mind when it came to picking up information, and he only opened a pool room because a man who owed him $400 went broke and gave it to him. The equipment, at least.

So he had a pool room.

Before that, he had had a job sweeping up the Egyptian wing of the Federated Natural History Museum, and Titus was just filled with all kinds of lore.

He had a girl friend, but he kept this pretty quiet, because she was married to a gunman named Roscoe Bruges. There was nothing really wrong about the setup. Roscoe had separated from her after Laura Bruges told him she'd have none of his thieving racket. But when he separated, he warned her that if any other guy tried to marry her, there would be a bump-off.

Even Titus knew this. Though Laura hadn't told him.

"Laura honey," he used to ask, "why is it I never can come to pick you up when we have a date? Why is it I always have to meet you in some dark doorway or street, and why can't we go places and see things?"

"Titus," Laura replied, "don't you love me for myself? Don't you just like being with me? We don't have to go places and see things if we have each other."

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"Yeah, but we haven't got each other," Titus said.

"Think of the money we save, for when we are married."

"Yeah," said Titus, growling a little. "But we're not married. Now understand, Laura, I'm not trying to quarrel with you, but I've asked you to marry me, and I've got a pretty good sockful of scratch from my pool room, and it'd give me some pleasure to set it down on the line for you. But you keep brushing me off and standing me in a corner. Are we gonna get married or am I gonna be an old maid — a bachelor, I mean?"

"Soon, darling, very soon."

So she didn't tell him. But one night Roscoe Bruges came into the pool room to shoot a little Kelly, and Roscoe got to drinking. First he got sad and kept talking about poor him and poor Laura. That made Titus sit up and take notice. Then Roscoe began to get belligerent.

He waved the cue around and said, "And remember, if I ever catch any one of you birds hanging around my Laura, I'll take my heater and put six soft-nosed pills in your hide, and when I get through there won't be enough viscera left in you for a sawbones to post-mortem."

"Please, Mr. Bruges," Titus Moozie said, coming to the table. He spoke with intense respect, because he had heard of Roscoe Bruges, and he knew that Roscoe carried a big Colt and was very dangerous. "I try to run a respectable place here, and when you shout like that, you scare every one else away, and they don't come back. You know how it is. I'm only trying to get along here in a small way."

The plea was so plaintive that Roscoe Bruges liked it. He slipped Titus a century note and said: "Sure, old boy, sure, old boy. Sorry I shot off my mouth. I wouldn't wanna hurt your business. Sure. But when I think of my darlin' li'l wife, Laura, turnin' me out in the cold —"

"What's her name?" Titus said.

"She calls herself Eastman now, Laura Eastman," said Roscoe Bruges. "But don't you go looking her up, Titus boy. I like you, kid. You remind me of a kid brother I had once. Cops bumped him. So don't you ever go near Laura Eastman, Titus, or you'll find yourself floating in a river with more lead in you than you can hold up. She may not want Roscoe Bruges for a husband, but as long as I live, she'll never have no one else."

That was how Titus Moozie first found out that he was engaged to a married woman whose husband was definitely homicidal. He did not sleep very well that night.

"This is good ice cream," Captain McGrail grunted. "I take back what I said about pistachio. The color is awful, but the flavor —"

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"Like the onion," I said. "Smells to heaven but otherwise is a rose. Hemingway said it before you."

"Who's he?" said Captain McGrail. "Never heard of him. Another writer like you?"

"Yeah," I said acidly, "he once wrote a book called *Death in the Afternoon.*"

"I never read detective stories," said McGrail.

"Wait a second," I sighed. "You're getting away from me. On this Titus Moozie saga, you're using phony names, of course, but it seems to me that I recall a case where a gunman wouldn't let his wife get married to some one else, and the whole thing blew up —"

"Wait a minute!" Captain McGrail roared. "Who's telling this story, you or me? You asked for a story, and you're going to get one, and I don't want any denouements from you before I'm finished, or I'll lay a billy on your skull!"

"Well, all right," I snapped. "Then get on with it and never mind the state of the pistachio nut! I was only going to say that I never remembered any eight-ball in this other case, which, incidentally, was a lot more interesting than this drab pool-room ditty you're drumming up. Go ahead, captain, what cooked after that?"

Glaring at me, but not angry enough to spurn the ice cream I had brought, Captain McGrail continued.

Titus Moozie had a pretty good idea (said McGrail) why his girl friend didn't meet him openly, and he was sorry he had ever complained about the arrangement.

"Why," he thought, "suppose she had taken me up on it and let me call for her and let me take her places? You're a long time dead, brother, a long time dead. And the worst of it is, if Roscoe Bruges were really mad at you, his shots would be well placed so that you would be a long time dying."

The next night, when he saw Laura, he met her in Brooklyn at some obscure roller-skating rink, and this only after he had definitely established the fact that Roscoe had nearly cracked his skull roller-skating and had sworn he would never touch the damn things again.

"Well," Titus said limply as they skated, "I'm on to the whole thing, Laura. Roscoe was in playing pool at my place and he got to drinking and spilled everything."

Laura wilted. "I'm sorry, Titus," she whispered. "I didn't want you to know. He's made me so lonely with his arrogant threats. Everyone I've ever known has been driven away from me. Now you'll go, too."

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Titus had considered taking it on the lam from her, but when the moment for the decision arrived, he changed his mind.

"Look, I'm not a brave man," he said, "but it comes to me that I'm really in love with you, Laura. Really, I am. And I'm not gonna scare. Can't you get a divorce from him?"

"I have divorced him," she said. "I divorced him when I went to California. Only it won't be final for another month. And that won't do any good. I know Roscoe. Divorce is only something legal. He doesn't believe in anything legal. If you married me, he'd shoot you on sight and take the rap. I'm afraid there's no way out."

They left it that way when they parted, making another date for the next night. But it did look hopeless. Unless something happened to Roscoe Bruges.

Next day, Titus Moozie was at the pool room, looking morbidly at the green tables and not seeing them, listening to the click of the balls without hearing them, when Joe, his attendant, came over and said: "Boss, there's a wack here to see you, a very screwy individual, who claims he's got something to sell you."

"I'm not buying anything," said Titus, dejected.

"He says you're going to buy this," Joe replied. "It's a ball. For pool. Only — get this, boss — it ain't ivory. It's wood."

"I can't use a wooden ball," said Titus, staring. He suddenly turned. "Wood?"

"Made of oak. An oaken eight-ball," said Joe. "The guy is gentle and harmless and kind of a wack. Maybe you better see him, boss. Nice gent. He claims the eight-ball is enchanted."

"Enchanted? That means magical, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, like the flying carpet and Aladdin's lamp. That's what enchanted means."

"Say," Titus remarked. "Send in the gentleman. Of course, you never believe all that enchantment stuff, like the apple in *Snow White*. Remember? And the Blue Fairy in *Pinocchio?*"

"Oh yeah," said Joe. "It was hot stuff. But Disney can do that in pictures. It takes a miracle in real life. Anyway, I'll send him in."

He came in, an elderly, white-haired man with the face of a philosopher and long, slender hands. He carried in those hands, a box. It was a strange box. Three sides of it were studded with sharp nails. The other side was bare. You could only carry it by holding the bare side. He placed it on the desk, and Titus finds himself staring at the eight-ball.

It looked him right in the eye. It was oak, all right. You could see the grain of the wood through the black paint which covered the ball, and it

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wasn't a perfect sphere, either. The black 8 in its little white circle was like an evil eye. It was fascinating.

Titus reached toward the ball to pick it up, but the white-haired gentleman said, "Please, Mr. Moozie," and grasped his hand strongly. Titus desisted, puzzled.

The man said, "I am Dr. Monday."

"Glad to know you," Titus grunted. He shook hands and looked funny. "Monday? No kidding, doc, is the moniker real?"

"I assure you it is. And no more strange than Moozie, is it?"

Titus chuckled. "I guess it ain't. Only it's such a queer handle. Dr. Monday. Well, doc, what's your racket, and what about this eight-ball? It's kind of a relic, isn't it?"

"It's very old," said Dr. Monday. "Five hundred years old at least. It was found in Spain. Eighteen years ago. Titus, it's enchanted."

"That's what Joe said," Titus remarked. "Of course, I'm not superstitious myself. But it's a gadget, and I go for them. How much do you want for it, doc?"

"You don't understand," said Dr. Monday gently. "I have brought the eight-ball here to give it to you. But I must warn you before I present it to you that it is enchanted. That is why I did not let you pick it up. Surely you have noticed the box?"

"Yeah, funny."

"The box was made so that the eight-ball could never be carried by hand except in one position. Which position?"

"Facing me."

"Exactly. In other words, the box prevents you, in carrying it, from ever getting behind it. Therein lies the enchantment, Titus. And please remember this well. Never get behind this eight-ball. For here on your desk is the ball which started the whole history of the unlucky eight-ball. This ball was made by an old Spanish woodworker whose daughter had been jilted by a Spanish nobleman. The old woodworker put a curse upon it, the curse to fall on any soul who dwelt in its shadow. He presented it to the nobleman, who, playing one evening, stood behind it and died."

"That sounds," said Titus, "like the old malarkey."

"Believe me," said Dr. Monday. "Who stands in the shadow of this ball will die before the next dawn. I have seen it proven with my own eyes. The ball is yours. Be careful with it. Good day."

And he was gone from the pool room in the twinkling of an eye. Titus went after him, but couldn't find the old man. Then he came back and sat down and touched the ball and took it out of the box. But he did not turn it around. He always kept the eye looking at him, and when he put

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the ball back, he pushed the box against the wall so that no one could get behind it.

"In the words of Titus Moozie," I remarked candidly, "it sounds like the old malarkey. Or do you wish me to amplify with sound?"

"Now listen," said Captain McGrail, "this pistachio ice cream is almost gone, and I don't have any more call to be civil to you, and I don't like your attitude. The trouble with the younger generation is that you're all cynics."

"Because I don't believe Spanish noblemen knew anything about the game of pool and the overworked eight-ball, I'm a cynic?" I said.

"You've got no faith," said McGrail. "You youngsters don't believe in miracles no more. This was a miracle, the whole thing. You wait till I finish, and then we'll see what you think of the old eight-ball."

"Listen," I said, "I know the story. Titus pulled the eight-ball gag on you cops and then went out and bumped off Roscoe and blamed it all on the eight-ball, but you didn't believe it and you caught him and he burned in the chair. It's a lousy story, but I'll get it typed up for the afternoon editions, and where's my hat?"

"You sit still," said Captain McGrail. "I ain't finished this story and you're all wrong. In the first place, what Doc Monday said is what he said. Titus Moozie told me it verbatim to my face, and if you had known Titus, you would know that he is not a liar. No, and he ain't a killer, either. Titus was just an honest guy trying to get along."

"All right," I said. "You begin to fascinate me, captain. Just as if you were a cobra. And me a little bird unable to flutter a wing under your intriguing stare. Hiss away, snake, and give out with the imbroglio."

Early that evening (said McGrail) who should show up at the pool room with his hangers-on and some of the boys but Roscoe Bruges, feeling pretty well set up with a couple of quick ones under his belt.

"Titus!" he yelled. "Where's Titus?"

Titus Moozie was in the office, but he came out and shook hands with the gun-toting boy from back bay and swallowed hard and tried to see in Roscoe's eyes if Roscoe had come to sink one in the Moozie viscera, or was it just a Kelly pool party.

"Titus," said Roscoe, "I'm a sucker for screwy trinkets and gadgets and such, and I hear tell up on the main stem that you got yourself a magical eight-ball down here."

Titus stared at Roscoe hard. "Where did you hear that, Mr. Bruges?" he asked. "It isn't generally known."

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"Why, I dunno," said Roscoe truthfully. "I was sitting in Sullivan's place and I overheard a couple of ginzos talking about it. They mentioned your name, Moozie, which is what caught my ear, and they was saying you had an eight-ball here that was 500 years old and had a curse on it. They said it was kind of a lethal weapon, as the cops put it."

"Well," said Titus, not sure of himself. "I don't know, Mr. Bruges. You aren't interested in that sort of stuff —"

But he wondered. Roscoe Bruges' eyes looked funny, all dark and gloomy and kind of scared.

"Oh, I ain't superstitious," Roscoe said, knocking wood. "Of course, I don't walk under any ladders and I keep away from mirrors. I mean, that's different. I roll with the sevens and keep away from thirteen, and I don't like black cats. But that ain't being superstitious. I mean, something really might happen to a guy if he didn't play ball with that kind of stuff. But I'm a pretty down-to-earth fellow and I was just interested in seeing this gadget, seeing what it looked like."

"All right," Titus said. "Come in the office."

"Eddie," said Roscoe, "you come, too."

He was nervous. Titus thought, for a moment, that the jig was up and that it was a bump-off with the ball as an excuse, but it didn't really turn out that way.

Titus sat down at the desk and pulled the nail-studded box toward him. He lifted the cover off. Roscoe moved toward the desk and stared down at the black ball with the 8 on it. His breath was whistling and his eyes were badly glazed. He looked like a sick man. His color wasn't good. Even Eddie didn't look too happy about it.

"So that's it," Roscoe whispered. "It looks like any hunk of wood, don't it? But when a guy puts a curse on something —" He laughed and straightened up. "It really ain't anything, not even a good eight-ball."

Titus said, "There's something damn strange about this ball, though. I tell you, Mr. Bruges, there's something sinister about it."

"Yeah?" Roscoe said, whispering again.

"I wouldn't stand behind it myself."

"You wouldn't?"

"No," Titus said. "I'll tell you. A guy came in and gave it to me. He was a pretty strange bird. He told me this thing about the curse on it. Me, I'm not superstitious, and I didn't believe it. No more than you do." He glanced at Roscoe who was sweating. "I had a cat named Mucker. I took the ball out and put it so's he was behind it. He's dead."

Roscoe swallowed. "What — happened to him?"

"He's just dead," Titus said slowly. "Just dead."

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There was a long silence. Eddie gulped audibly. Roscoe Bruges was breathing too heavily. "I hate cursed things," he said harshly. "I wish guys wouldn't put a curse on things. A curse lasts. Put that damn thing away, Titus. I don't want to see no more of it."

Titus put the cover on the box.

"Look," said Roscoe, "I'll give you a hundred bucks to take that thing and throw it in the river."

"No," said Titus. "I couldn't do that, Mr. Bruges. I'll give it to you as a present if you want it —"

"No! Don't give me the thing, don't get it near me! Just throw it away and I'll pay you off."

"Oh, no," said Titus. "A man can never know when he'd have to use a thing like that. A man never knows. I'll keep it, Mr. Bruges."

"What for?" Bruges said.

"I might have an enemy," said Titus.

That night Titus had a date with Laura Eastman who was still, through a technicality, Mrs. Roscoe Bruges. They had made the rendezvous an inconspicuous ice-skating rink in the Bronx. When Titus got there, Laura was waiting for him and they rented their skates and went around and around.

"I'll say one thing," said Titus as they skated. "This meeting at strange places is developing me. I never knew how to roller-skate or ice-skate and look at me now. Next time, we ought to make it a skeet-gun range so's I could develop my aim. I may have to use a good aim, getting married to you; you never know."

"Titus," she said alarmed, "whatever happens, never commit violence. You wouldn't think of killing him, really, would you? Because that would be no good. I couldn't love a man who stooped to violence. Really I couldn't. What I love about you is that you are of the meek who will inherit the earth."

"But I want to inherit you," Titus said. "I'm only kidding about my aim. And I'm going to inherit you. I don't know how yet, but it can be swung. There's a chip in the steel armor around your husband's heart. I found it out today. He's superstitious."

"Superstitious isn't the word," said Laura, her eyes glinting strangely. "So you've found that out? Roscoe is absolutely terrified of all things which are in any way superstitious. On a Friday the thirteenth he won't even get out of bed. He's ignorant and he believes in luck, and so he also believes in curses and bad luck."

"So I learned," Titus remarked. "It may do us both some good. That means he can be buffaloed into leaving you alone. If I were to hex him and

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let him know he was being hexed, I think he would come around to my way of thinking about you."

"Perhaps," she said. "But he might even drop his superstitions rather than go back on his word to isolate me. We can only see. But it will take time and you'll have to be patient."

It took less time than either of them thought. It so happened, unknown to them, that Roscoe Bruges was working the old protection racket, and that the Marvelo Ice-Skating Rink was one of those going little concerns which attracted lice like Roscoe.

Roscoe had had a little trouble lining up Mr. Portry, who owned the rink; and this same night, Roscoe showed up to talk Mr. Portry into cutting the melon and shooting some of the scratch of the take into the pocket of R. Bruges.

Roscoe came late, had his little talk with Portry and again did not have much luck.

"All right, Portry," he said. "So if something happens to your place, if it burns down tonight from some guys firing it, or if your patrons get scared off, don't blame it on me. I'm only offering my services to keep away trouble."

"Listen," said Portry, "I know the racket, but I want to think it over. Just twenty-four hours. I'll give you my answer tomorrow night. I got to think, Roscoe, give me a break."

"Okay," said Roscoe. "Back I come tomorrow night to collect or wreck. You think hard on it, Greek. Personally, I don't see anything to think about. It's kick in with scratch or lose your joint. Good night."

It was after 11 and he and Eddie reached the sidewalk just as Titus Moozie and Laura Eastman came out of the rink to go home.

The four of them met on the sidewalk, as the taxis came up the street, scenting fares like a tiger scents meat.

"You dirty double-crossing —" Roscoe roared.

He started hauling out his gun.

Laura screamed, "Roscoe, don't shoot him! I love him, I love him! Don't hurt him —"

Roscoe got the gun out. It was a big Colt with a barrel like the Lincoln tunnel, only broader and longer.

Titus was white as death with the shock of meeting Roscoe like that, but he stood up to it and he didn't fade and run. You had to hand it to him. He dug into his jeans and he came up with the nail-studded box, flipped off the cover and grabbed the eight-ball.

There was Roscoe, aiming the gun, but transfixed by the sight of the eight-ball.

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There was Titus, holding the eight-ball in his right hand, the eye facing him, the back directly on a line with Roscoe's skull.

"*Don't give me its back!*" Roscoe shrilled.

"Sorry," Titus said slowly. "You asked for this, Roscoe. You're in the shadow of the eight-ball. There's a curse on it. You know all about it."

He kept the back on Roscoe and moved forward slowly toward the gunman. Roscoe backed away. His nerve suddenly broke, he dropped his pistol, and he started to run. He dashed into the street at the same time as a taxi dashed up to the curb. There was a hollow, metallic sound when they met, but the cab was built to last longer, and by the time the driver backed off Roscoe Bruges, it was quite evident that Laura Eastman did not have to wait for her divorce.

She was a widow. Yes, she was a widow for a night, because next day Titus Moozie married her, and they have lived happily ever after and now have four kids, and I hope they stop there, because you've got to stop some time.

The pistachio ice cream was gone. Captain McGrail wiped the green stain from his mustache and settled himself in the chair, putting his feet up on the desk and shutting his eyes. "Go on," he said. "Get out of here. You've got your story, I've got my ice cream, and the day is done. And don't come busting in here for another tale so soon."

"Wait a minute," I said. "I've got questions to ask. It's not a bad story as they go. But what about Eddie? There he was with Roscoe, and Eddie had a rod, too. What did Eddie do?"

"Nobody saw Eddie for a long time," said Captain McGrail. "Titus and Laura finally got a post card from him. He had gone straight and was raising oranges in California."

"That sure was a powerful eight-ball," I said drily. "And you came into the case, of course, when Roscoe was bumped. All right, where did you find Dr. Monday and who was he?"

"Never found him," said McGrail. "Strange character. Never did find him. There was an elderly actor named Guy Thomas who resembled him, but Titus was never able to make the identification. Guy Thomas incidentally was an uncle of Laura Eastman."

"How did you get the eight-ball?"

"Titus gave it to me. He didn't want it. It was too dangerous to leave around. You see where I've got it against the wall so's no one can get behind it?"

"All right, I'll go," I said. "Of course, it is just the malarky. I think Laura, knowing Roscoe was superstitious, hired her uncle to give Titus the eight-ball and then arranged for Roscoe to hear about it, knowing the

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thing would terrify and fascinate him. As for the rest, he was just so scared stiff, he bumped himself off by jumping in front of a car in a panic."

"Uh-huh," said McGrail.

"And about the cat that Titus said died when it got behind the eight-ball. Was that on the level?"

"Uh-huh, the cat was killed by a car."

"Coincidence, you see?"

"Sure, I see," said Captain McGrail drily. "And I forgot to tell you there was a horse and wagon in the street when Roscoe died. The horse got behind the eight-ball, because the horse happened to be directly behind Roscoe when Titus pulled the thing on him. It was icy in the street, the horse fell, broke a leg, and had to be shot on the spot."

"Oh, brother," I said, "are you pouring it on now! Personally, I think the whole story is a damn lie, and that eight-ball hasn't any more curse on it than the man in the moon."

"Okay," said McGrail sleepily. "You're not superstitious. There's the eight-ball. Pick it up and turn it around and stand behind it." He coughed meaningly. "You wouldn't do that."

"Sure I would," I said boldly. I grabbed my hat, eying the oaken sphere. "But as a matter of fact, I'm pretty late today, captain, and I'll have to be getting along. Some other day."

I could hear his laugh, echoing all the way down the hall as I went for the elevator.

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Once again a new author proves that no old theme is ever exhausted, by presenting an Invisible Playmate like none you have encountered before.

Gallie's House

by THELMA D. HAMM

"EENY, MEENY, miney, mo —" Nelda's eight-year-old voice rang out happily, her small finger pointing in rhythmic alternation at a slender birch and some unseen companion.

"There, Gallie!" she squealed ecstatically. "I thought for a minute the tree would be *out* and you'd be *in!*" Her laughter bubbled like water. "Oh dear, there's mother calling — see you after lunch!"

She bounced into the house, dashed into the bathroom and out again leaving a wake of soiled towels and soap spatters. Julia Smithers sighed in resignation, decided to ignore the problem once more and queried brightly, "Having fun, dear?"

Nelda spooned up her soup and nodded. "Yes, and Gallie says the *funniest* things." She giggled reminiscently. "She said if the birch tree was *it*, imagine it running after us on its roots!"

Her mother laughed. "Who *is* Gallie, dear?"

"She's a little girl . . . can I have another piece of bread?"

"*May* I," Julia corrected automatically. "But where does she live?"

"Here," Nelda returned vaguely. "Oh, there she is! Excuse-me-please," and galvanized into sudden activity, she was gone in a whirl of flying skirts and banging doors.

A few days later Julia, busy at the ironer, tried vainly to quell a growing sense of uneasiness. Surely this country isolation was better for a child than the atomic bogey-man terror of the city? She raised her head. The sudden cessation of noise outside was as audible to the ear as a clap of thunder. Assailed with a panic she was at a loss to understand, she flung open the door and called sharply, "Nelda! *Nelda!*"

The yard was empty, the high old wall unclimbable, the house behind her silent —

"Yes, Mama?" said an innocent voice behind her.

"Nelda! Where *were* you!"

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"In Gallie's house," Nelda explained matter-of-factly. "And she has a train — a real 'lectric train. Can I have one for Christmas, mama? Can I?"

Julia pushed her hair back. "Nelda! You nearly scared me out of my wits. And how did you get in anyway? The front door was locked."

"Gallie's door wasn't."

"Nelda, stop this nonsense and show me how you got in."

"O.K.," said Nelda obediently, walked to the dining room door, made a sharp turn and disappeared.

As she clung to the edge of the sink, Julia's mind ranged dizzily over the probabilities of (1) amnesia, (2) need of glasses and (3) plain insanity.

"Nelda," she quavered.

Nelda instantly reappeared, looking innocent inquiry.

"You look funny, Mama. Are you sick?"

"I don't know," said Julia in all honesty. "But Nelda, will you, just for a while, play in the *yard*? Please?"

"O.K." Nelda headed for the door.

"And Nelda —"

"Yes, Mama?"

"We must remember how important it is to — to understand things and — well, keep them straight. Now we know that Gallie isn't a real little girl. She's just an imaginary little girl in an imaginary house." Julia found her hands gripping the sink as her mind clutched at this needed reassurance. "Isn't she?"

"That's funny," said Nelda. "That's what *her* mother says about *me*."

The door slammed, the familiar, comforting shrieks resumed and normality settled down on the Smithers household.

A few evenings later, an unwontedly subdued Nelda looked up from her plate and said hesitantly, "Daddy, what does '*at*-omic' mean?"

"A-*tom*-ic," he corrected absently; then with a start, "Where did you hear that?" Blast people anyway, this was what they had been trying to shield her from —

"Gallie heard her father and mother talking about it. What *is* it, Daddy? They were scared. . . ." Her voice trailed off unhappily. In her world grownups were loving, snappy and liable to fits of incomprehensible laughter . . . but not *scared*.

"That's silly," her father said briskly. "Atomic power makes electricity and runs ships and airplanes, but it's nothing to be scared of . . . please God," he added silently.

Nelda looked up at him with admiration, her faith restored.

"Goody, I'll tell Gallie tomorrow. She was scared too, but I wasn't."

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"That's my girl," Julia grinned. "Come on now . . . bedtime."

The nightly ritual over, silence settled, broken only by the click of Julia's knitting needles, the rustle of Nelson's paper. . . .

Without conscious volition they found themselves jostling on the staircase, the appalling scream from Nelda's room still echoing in their ears. They reached the landing together as Nelda burst from her room, running blindly toward the back stairs.

"Baby!" Julia screamed.

The gray eyes turned towards them unseeing, occupied with some distant terror. "Gallie's hurt!" she wailed, turned sharply and disappeared.

Toward dawn they simply gave up the search and sat waiting. In the back of Nelson's mind ran like a refrain, "What's '*at*-omic' . . . Gallie's father and mother are scared . . . Gallie's scared, too . . ."

The darkness had just given way to the first weary grayness of dawn, when they heard the tired, stumbling footsteps coming up the walk, onto the porch. . . .

They reached the door together. Nelda stood looking at them, shocked gray eyes enormous in the dirt-and-tear-stained face. Unmoved by their embraces and their cries of pity and love, she stood stiffly, submitting to being felt all over for nonexistent injuries, moving like a little automaton to their demands.

It was Julia, desperate in the face of that shocked silence, who broke the spell.

"Why didn't you come back . . ." her voice stumbled over the phrase, ". . . through the . . . 'door'?"

Nelda looked past her with that set, frightening stare. Her lips moved stiffly.

"The house all fell down. All the doors were gone. But after awhile I found a piece of wall and came over . . . and it fell down, too. I can't ever get back."

There was a pause. Julia whispered, "And . . . Gallie?"

Nelda's chin quivered. "She's back there of course. Under the bricks. I heard her crying, but I couldn't . . . And then she stopped crying and I came away."

She looked at her father with that terrible clarity which marks the final disillusionment. " 'Airplanes' . . . !" she said. " ''Lectricity'. . . !" She ran past them into the house.

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Recommended Reading

by THE EDITORS

Two GENEROUS and imaginative publishers offer readers this month magnificent (and long overdue) collections of those giants of fantasy, Olaf Stapledon and H. Rider Haggard. Slightly the better of these absolute bests is TO THE END OF TIME: THE BEST OF OLAF STAPLEDON (Funk & Wagnalls). This collossal display of Stapledon's genius — the five novels printed herein run to more than 388,000 words! — has been selected by Basil Davenport, whose introduction offers such a brilliantly exact appraisal of Stapledon as a thinker and storyteller that there is, frankly, little left for a reviewer to say about the man and his work.

The book opens with that full-length portrait of the future of the human races, LAST AND FIRST MEN (1930). We read that mighty novel twenty-two years ago when we were but dimly aware of a kind of writing called science fiction; today, as editors in that field, we are constantly amazed by the numbers of themes and theories that our most thoughtful writers are constantly developing from Stapledon's concepts. From man Stapledon turns his attention to the cosmos in THE STAR MAKER (1937), not so successful as a novel as is LAST AND FIRST MEN — possibly because the theme is too vast to expound in terms of story — but still a dazzling display of creative imagination. Third in the collection is what these reviewers consider the best novel about a superman yet to be written, ODD JOHN (1935). No one else has ever made *Homo superior* so fully-rounded, so alien and yet *human* a character; no other writer has so completely exploited the inevitability of tragedy if man and superman fail to adjust to each other. The fourth novel, SIRIUS (1944), is also small-scale and personal. This moving story of the relationship between a superdog and his mistress is the Master at his best in exploring all facets, especially the emotional and intellectual, of a problem that has not yet developed but — such is the conviction of his vision — we know will one day be close at hand. Weak as a story, the very brief novel THE FLAMES (1947) is a complete manual of instruction for any writer wishing to create alien life-forms.

Prospective buyers of this collection should bear in mind that only two of its five novels, ODD JOHN and THE FLAMES, have been previously published in this country. It is really shocking to realize that for twenty-three years no American publisher has deemed it fitting or proper to do an

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edition of LAST AND FIRST MEN! But now that neglect is over and done with; all that can be found in Olaf Stapledon's writing — penetrating comment on man and his society, perception and understanding of life (whether human or alien), and recognition of the unstoppable flow of history — has been gathered together for you in one lovingly prepared, beautifully organized volume.

H. Rider Haggard is one of the great creators of the fantasy-epic in our language. Who can forget how that old Zulu hero, Umslopagaas, held the stair in ALLAN QUARTERMAIN and who will not match his warsong with the noblest of Homeric poetry? Or, in NADA THE LILY, the wondrous story of Galazi and his enchanted war-club, The-Watcher-of-the-Fords, which brought its owner eventual death but imperishable glory? And — but enough! Now Dover Publications offers its eager (and lucky!) clients a second Haggard omnibus, LOST CIVILIZATIONS, which contains MONTEZUMA'S DAUGHTER, ERIC BRIGHTEYES and CLEOPATRA — some 769 pages of bold adventure and oddly intuitive fantasy among Aztecs, Icelanders and the crumbling Egypt of Cleopatra.

Since this will assuredly find readers who don't know Rider Haggard, it's unfortunate that the first novel is the Aztec one, with its unusually slow and often incredible opening chapters; the collection might better have opened with the long-out-of-print ERIC BRIGHTEYES, certainly a saga in every sense of the word. Suffice it to say that nothing has been written in English that matches this complete comprehension of the blend of fury and mysticism that was that greatest of anomalies, the Viking. And, if any rabid holdout needs further convincing, we say that Eric was the worthy peer of the otherwise incomparable Umslopagaas. CLEOPATRA consists of a not always believable portrait of that lady and a fascinating, wholly convincing account of the dwindling faithful and their vain attempt to halt the progress of history and restore the lost religion of Isis and Osiris. If Olaf Stapledon remains as the greatest thinker in science-fantasy, H. Rider Haggard is its greatest storyteller.

To this company is added a large volume by another man often labeled a "Master of Fantasy": A. Merritt's DWELLERS IN THE MIRAGE and THE FACE IN THE ABYSS (Liveright). We note this for those who seem to like this writer's work. To us, the present company is much too fast for him.

Surprisingly, this month's only collection of short stories is a reprint, and a strongly recommended one: Robert A. Heinlein's bright, fresh, literate anthology TOMORROW, THE STARS (Signet). But recent publications include no fewer than seven science fiction novels: three of them being first hardcover appearances of past magazine serials, two representing extensive expansion of magazine material, and two completely new.

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The serial revivals are, we're afraid, of interest chiefly to specialists. Perley Poore Sheehan's 1915 THE ABYSS OF WONDERS (Polaris) is an attractively printed, bound and cased limited collectors' edition, but unfortunately equally limited in appeal — a trite, oversimple, lost-race Shangri-La affair with none of the vigorous storytelling which one might expect from an "Argosy" novel. Isaac Asimov's 1948–1950 SECOND FOUNDATION (Gnome) and Edward E. Smith's 1941–1942 SECOND STAGE LENSMAN (Fantasy Press) will hardly create any new market for their respective series, but should appease the appetites of those who, for reasons we have never understood, are willing to go on year in and year out reading hundreds of thousands of words about Foundations and Lensmen.

The expanded stories are a good deal more interesting, if also somewhat provoking. Charles L. Harness's FLIGHT INTO YESTERDAY (Bouregy & Curle) turns a 1949 novelet into a booklength novel; it's fine swashbuckling adventure of space-and-time travel, the palace politics of tyranny, and the identity-problems of an amnesiac superman — all markedly reminiscent of van Vogt's "Weapon Shop" series and almost as much fun. But it's so infinitely intricate that you may never quite understand what it's about; and its "science" is hard indeed to believe — particularly since its entire mechanism of time-travel appears to rest on a basic mathematical error which should flunk a teen-ager out of first-semester algebra.

Just about every science fiction reader is familiar with Wilmar H. Shiras' 1948 "In Hiding," regularly reprinted and justly acclaimed as a superlative small-scale study of the attempts of a mutant superchild to make himself acceptable to society by playing the part of a normal boy; and its 1949 sequel, "Opening Doors," dealing with the gradual discovery of a group of such children, mutant results of an atomic disaster, is equally noteworthy. Now Mrs. Shiras has gathered these, together with another published novelet and much new material, into a long novel, CHILDREN OF THE ATOM (Gnome). If by any chance you don't know the first two stories, the book is worth owning for them alone; if you do know them, however, you may well be as disappointed as were we in the later developments — talkative, oversimplified, lacking in suspense or conflict and, in short, just not adding up to an adequate novelistic treatment of a splendidly stated theme.

Of the completely new novels, WORLD OUT OF MIND (Doubleday) marks the full-length debut of one of F&SF's favorite writers of novelets, the Scot, J. T. M'Intosh. It's the old theme (used seven times in novels in the first half of 1953 alone!) of there-are-other-world-agents-among-us, but from the interesting viewpoint of an alien agent so completely transferred to an earth-body that he begins to take on earthly thoughts and feelings . . . and even to forget the alien mission he is to carry out. The story's as

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professionally readable as one expects of Mr. M'Intosh, but somewhat sketchily written, with characters undeveloped and plot-inconsistencies overlooked; good enough Grade B, but not the science fiction novel that we're sure M'Intosh can produce.

Wilson Tucker's THE TIME MASTERS (Rinehart) is in most respects the best of the current crop, and probably the smoothest and most human in appeal of any of Mr. Tucker's novels, science fiction or mystery. Actually this combines these two fields of his: it's a detective story about a private investigator, who is forceful and effective without Spillanism, and an imaginative science fiction story. (There are agents among us once again. . . .) As underplayed melodrama with marked personal warmth and high ingenuity (so much so that a review can hardly mention plot or theme), it's a decidedly satisfactory book — up to an exasperating ending pulled abruptly out of the space helmet and violating the very premises upon which Tucker has built his story.

The annual Bleiler-Dikty collection of "best novels" means of course novelets, or what Horace Gold and Whit Burnett call novellas: roughly the 15,000-to 25,000-word lengths. YEAR'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS: 1953 (Fell) contains one brightly shining gem: William Tenn's "Firewater," a fictional essay on the interplanetary role of sharp business which is as shrewd as it is wittily entertaining. A time travel story by Murray Leinster is amusing, if familiar and overlong; James Blish on a microscopic marine civilization and Walter Miller, Jr. on manufactured humanoids present some provocative ideas, often badly digested as fiction; and Boyd Ellanby offers a purely routine treatment of a conventional immortality-serum theme. We imagine this may very well be a representative selection of the year's novelets (which have not already been reprinted or tabbed for expansion to booklength), and on a transitory newsstand level it's readable enough; we wish Messrs. Bleiler and Dikty better luck next year with stories for library permanence.

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This is a story about a man, that man's friend, and that man's girl; it is a variation on a standard theme of fiction. But *it is a variation that could occur only in a not-yet-born society with certain economic and social values and certain extraordinary scientific processes; that is, it could be written only as* science *fiction and, to bring out all its individual poignancy, only by Alfred Bester.*

Time Is the Traitor

by ALFRED BESTER

YOU CAN'T go back and you can't catch up. Happy endings are always bitter-sweet.

There was a man named John Strapp; the most valuable, the most powerful, the most legendary man in a world containing 700 planets and 1700 milliards of peoples. He was prized for one quality alone. He could make Decisions. Note the capital D. He was one of the few men who could make Major Decisions in a world of incredible complexity, and his Decisions were 87 per cent correct. He sold his Decisions for high prices.

There would be an industry named . . . say . . . Bruxton Biotics, with plants on Deneb Alpha, Mizar III, Terra, and main offices on Alcor IV. Bruxton's gross income was Cr. 270 millions. The involutions of Bruxton's trade relations with consumers and competitors required the specialized services of 200 company economists, each an expert on one tiny facet of the vast overall picture. No one was big enough to coordinate the entire picture.

Bruxton would need a Major Decision on policy. A research expert named E. T. A. Goland in the Deneb laboratories had discovered a new catalyst for biotic synthesis. It was an embryological hormone that rendered nucleonic molecules as plastic as clay. The clay could be modelled and developed in any direction. Query: Should Bruxton abandon the old culture methods and retool for this new technique? The Decision involved an infinite ramification of inter-reacting factors: cost, saving, time, supply, demand, training, patents, patent legislation, court actions, and so on. There was only one answer. Ask Strapp.

The initial negotiations were crisp. Strapp Associates replied that John

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Strapp's fee was Cr. 100,000 plus 1 per cent of the voting stock of Bruxton Biotics. Take it or leave it. Bruxton Biotics took it with pleasure.

The second step was more complicated. John Strapp was very much in demand. He was scheduled for Decisions at the rate of two a week straight through to the first of the year. Could Bruxton wait that long for an appointment? Bruxton could not. Bruxton was TT'd a list of John Strapp's future appointments and told to arrange a swap with any of the clients as best they could. Bruxton bargained, bribed, blackmailed and arranged a trade. John Strapp was to appear at the Alcor central plant on Monday, June 29, at noon precisely.

Then the mystery began. At 9 o'clock that Monday morning, Aldous Fisher, the acidulous liaison man for Strapp, appeared at Bruxton's offices. After a brief conference with old man Bruxton himself, the following announcement was broadcast through the plant: ATTENTION! ATTENTION! URGENT! URGENT! ALL MALE PERSONNEL NAMED KRUGER REPORT TO CENTRAL. REPEAT. ALL MALE PERSONNEL NAMED KRUGER REPORT TO CENTRAL. URGENT! REPEAT. URGENT!

Forty-seven men named Kruger reported to Central and were sent home with strict instructions to stay home until further notice. The plant police organized a hasty winnowing and, goaded by the irascible Fisher, checked the identification cards of all the employees they could reach. Nobody named Kruger should remain in the plant, but it was impossible to comb out 2,500 men in three hours. Fisher burned and fumed like nitric acid.

By 11:30, Bruxton Biotics was running a fever. Why send home all the Krugers? What did it have to do with the legendary John Strapp? What kind of a man was Strapp? What did he look like? How did he act? He earned Cr. 10 millions a year. He owned 1 per cent of the world. He was so close to God in the minds of the personnel that they expected angels and golden trumpets and a giant bearded creature of infinite wisdom and compassion.

At 11:40 Strapp's personal bodyguard arrived; a security squad of ten men in plain-clothes who checked doors and halls and *cul-de-sacs* with icy efficiency. They gave orders. This had to be removed. That had to be locked. Such and such had to be done. It was done. No one argued with John Strapp. The security squad took positions and waited. Bruxton Biotics held its breath.

Noon struck, and a silver mote appeared in the sky. It approached with a high whine and landed with agonizing speed and precision before the main gate. The door of the ship snapped open. Two burly men stepped out alertly, their eyes busy. The chief of the security squad made a sign. Out

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of the ship came two secretaries, brunette and redheaded, striking, chic, efficient. After them came a thin, fortyish clerk in a baggy suit with papers stuffed in his side pockets, wearing hornshell spectacles and a harassed air. After him came a magnificent creature, tall, majestic, clean-shaven but of infinite wisdom and compassion.

The burly men closed in on the beautiful man and escorted him up the steps and through the main door. Bruxton Biotics sighed happily. John Strapp was no disappointment. He was indeed God, and it was a pleasure to have 1 per cent of yourself owned by him. The visitors marched down the main hall to old man Bruxton's office and entered. Bruxton had waited for them, poised majestically behind his desk. Now he leaped to his feet and ran forward. He grasped the magnificent man's hand fervently and exclaimed, "Mr. Strapp, sir, on behalf of my entire organization, I welcome you."

The clerk closed the door and said, "I'm Strapp." He nodded to his decoy who sat down quietly in a corner. "Where's your data?"

Old Man Bruxton pointed faintly to his desk. Strapp sat down behind it, picked up the fat folders and began to read. A thin man. A harassed man. A fortyish man. Straight black hair. China blue eyes. A good mouth. Good bones under the skin. One quality stood out . . . a complete lack of self-consciousness. But when he spoke there was a hysterical undercurrent in his voice that showed something violent and possessed deep inside him.

After two hours of breakneck reading and muttered comments to his secretaries who made cryptic notes in Whithead symbols, Strapp said, "I want to see the plant."

"Why?" Bruxton asked.

"To feel it," Strapp answered. "There's always the nuance involved in a Decision. It's the most important factor."

They left the office and the parade began. The security squad, the burly men, the secretaries, the clerk, the acidulous Fisher and the magnificent decoy. They marched everywhere. They saw everything. The "clerk" did most of the leg work for "Strapp." He spoke to workers, foremen, technicians, high, low and middle brass. He asked names, gossiped, introduced them to the great man, talked about their families, working conditions, ambitions. He explored, smelled and felt. After four exhausting hours they returned to Bruxton's office. The "clerk" closed the door. The decoy stepped aside.

"Well?" Bruxton asked. "Yes or No?"

"Wait," Strapp said.

He glanced through his secretaries' notes, absorbed them, closed his eyes

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and stood still and silent in the middle of the office like a man straining to hear a distant whisper.

"Yes," he Decided, and was Cr. 100,000 and 1 per cent of the voting stock of Bruxton Biotics richer. In return, Bruxton had an 87 percent assurance that the Decision was correct. Strapp opened the door again, the parade reassembled and marched out of the plant. Personnel grabbed its last chance to take photos and touch the great man. The clerk helped promote public relations with eager affability. He asked names, introduced and amused. The sound of voices and laughter increased as they reached the ship. Then the incredible happened.

"You!" the clerk cried suddenly. His voice screeched horribly. "You son of a bitch! You goddamned lousy murdering bastard! I've been waiting for this. I've waited ten years!" He pulled a flat gun from his inside pocket and shot a man through the forehead.

Time stood still. It took hours for the brains and blood to burst out of the back of the head and for the body to crumple. Then the Strapp staff leaped into action. They hurled the clerk into the ship. The secretaries followed, then the decoy. The two burly men leaped after them and slammed the door. The ship took off and disappeared with a fading whine. The ten men in plain-clothes quietly drifted off and vanished. Only Fisher, the Strapp liaison man, was left alongside the body in the center of the horrified crowd.

"Check his identification," Fisher snapped.

Someone pulled the dead man's wallet out and opened it.

"William F. Kruger, bio-mechanic."

"The damned fool!" Fisher said savagely. "We warned him. We warned all the Krugers. All right. Call the police."

That was John Strapp's sixth murder. It cost exactly Cr. 500,000 to fix. The other five had cost the same, and half the amount usually went to a man desperate enough to substitute for the killer and plead temporary insanity. The other half went to the heirs of the deceased. There were six of these substitutes languishing in various penitentiaries, serving from twenty to 50 years, their families Cr. 250,000 richer.

In their suite in the Alcor Splendide, the Strapp staff consulted gloomily.

"Six in six years," Aldous Fisher said bitterly. "We can't keep it quiet much longer. Sooner or later somebody's going to ask why John Strapp always hires crazy clerks."

"Then we fix him too," the redheaded secretary said. "Strapp can afford it."

"He can afford a murder a month," the magnificent decoy murmured.

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"No." Fisher shook his head sharply. "You can fix so far and no further. You reach a saturation point. We've reached it now. What are we going to do?"

"What the hell's the matter with Strapp anyway?" one of the burly men inquired.

"Who knows?" Fisher exclaimed in exasperation. "He's got a Kruger fixation. He meets a man named Kruger . . . any man named Kruger. He screams. He curses. He murders. Don't ask me why. It's something buried in his past."

"Haven't you asked him?"

"How can I? It's like an epileptic fit. He never knows it happened."

"Take him to a psychoanalyst," the decoy suggested.

"Out of the question."

"Why?"

"You're new," Fisher said. "You don't understand."

"Make me understand."

"I'll make an analogy. Back in the 1900's, people played card games with 52 cards in the deck. Those were simple times. Today everything's more complex. We're playing with 5200 in the deck. Understand?"

"I'll go along with it."

"A mind can figure 52 cards. It can make decisions on that total. They had it easy in the 1900's. But no mind is big enough to figure 5200 . . . no mind except Strapp's."

"We've got computors."

"And they're perfect when only cards are involved. But when you have to figure 5200 cardplayers too . . . their likes, dislikes, motives, inclinations, prospects, tendencies, and so on . . . what Strapp calls the nuances, then Strapp can do what a machine can't do. He's unique, and we may destroy his uniqueness with psychoanalysis."

"Why?"

"Because it's an unconscious process in Strapp," Fisher explained irritably. "He doesn't know how he does it. If he did he'd be 100 per cent right instead of 87 per cent. It's an unconscious process and for all we know it may be linked up with the same abnormality that makes him murder Krugers. If we get rid of one we may destroy the other. We can't take the chance."

"Then what do we do?"

"Protect our property," Fisher said, looking around ominously. "Never forget that for a minute. We've put in too much work on Strapp to let it be destroyed. We protect our property!"

"I think he needs a friend," the brunette said.

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"Why?"

"We could find out what's bothering him without destroying anything. People talk to their friends. Strapp might talk."

"We're his friends."

"No, we're not. We're his associates."

"Have you been to bed with him?"

"Of course."

"Has he talked to you?"

"No."

"You?" Fisher shot at the redhead.

She shook her head. "It isn't friendly going to bed with Strapp. It's a war."

"How?"

"He's looking for something he never finds."

"What?"

"A woman, I think. A special kind of woman."

"A woman named Kruger?"

"I don't know."

"Damn it, it doesn't make sense." Fisher thought a moment. "All right. We'll have to hire him a friend, and we'll have to ease off the schedule to give the friend a chance to make Strapp talk. From now on we cut the program to one Decision a week."

"My God!" the brunette exclaimed. "That's cutting five million a year."

"It's got to be done," Fisher said grimly. "It's cut now or take a total loss later. We're rich enough to stand it."

"What are you going to do for a friend?" the decoy asked.

"I said we'd hire one. We'll hire the best. Get Terra on the TT. Tell them to locate Frank Alceste and put him through urgent."

"Frankie!" the redhead squealed. "I swoon."

"Ooh! Frankie!" The brunette fanned herself.

"You mean Fatal Frank Alceste? The heavyweight champ?" The burly man asked in awe. "I saw him fight Lonzo Jordan. Oh, man!"

"He's an actor now," the decoy explained. "I worked with him once. He sings. He dances. He —"

"And he's twice as fatal," Fisher interrupted. "We'll hire him. Make out a contract. He'll be Strapp's friend. As soon as Strapp meets him he'll —"

"Meets who?" Strapp appeared in the doorway of his bedroom, yawning, blinking in the light. He always slept deeply after his attacks. "Who am I going to meet?" He looked around, thin, graceful, but harassed and indubitably possessed.

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"A man named Frank Alceste," Fisher said. "He badgered us for an introduction and we can't hold him off any longer."

"Frank Alceste?" Strapp murmured. "Never heard of him."

Strapp could make Decisions; Alceste could make friends. He was a powerful man in his middle thirties, sandy-haired, freckle-faced, with a broken nose and deep-set gray eyes. His voice was high and soft. He moved with the athlete's lazy poise that is almost feminine. He charmed you without knowing how he did it, or even wanting to do it. He charmed Strapp, but Strapp also charmed him. They became friends.

"No, it really is friends," Alceste told Fisher when he returned the check that had been paid him. "I don't need the money, and old Johnny needs me. Forget you hired me original-like. Tear up the contract. I'll try to straighten Johnny out on my own."

Alceste turned to leave the suite in the Rigel Splendide and passed the great-eyed secretaries. "If I wasn't so busy, ladies," he murmured, "I'd sure like to chase you a little."

"Chase me, Frankie," the brunette blurted.

The redhead looked caught.

And as Strapp Associates zigzagged in slow tempo from city to city and planet to planet, making the one Decision a week, Alceste and Strapp enjoyed themselves while the magnificent decoy gave interviews and posed for pictures. There were interruptions when Frankie had to return to Terra to make a picture, but in between they golfed, tennised, brubaged, bet on horses, dogs and dowlens, and went to fights and routs. They hit the nightspots and Alceste came back with a curious report.

"Me, I don't know how close you folks been watching Johnny," he told Fisher, "but if you think he's been sleeping every night, safe in his little trundle, you better switch notions."

"How's that?" Fisher asked in surprise.

"Old Johnny, he's been sneaking out nights all along when you folks thought he was getting his brain rest."

"How do you know?"

"By his reputation," Alceste told him sadly. "They know him everywhere. They know old Johnny in every bistro from here to Orion. And they know him the worst way."

"By name?"

"By nickname. Wasteland, they call him."

"Wasteland!"

"Uh huh. Mr. Devastation. He runs through women like a prairie fire. You don't know this?"

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Fisher shook his head.

"Must pay off out of his personal pocket," Alceste mused and departed.

There was a terrifying quality to the possessed way that Strapp ran through women. He would enter a club with Alceste, take a table, sit down and drink. Then he would stand up and coolly survey the room, table by table, woman by woman. Upon occasion men would become angered and offer to fight. Strapp disposed of them coldly and viciously, in a manner that excited Alceste's professional admiration. Frankie never fought himself. No professional ever touches an amateur. But he tried to keep the peace, and failing that, at least kept the ring.

After the survey of the women guests, Strapp would sit down and wait for the show, relaxed, chatting, laughing. When the girls appeared, his grim possession would take over again and he would examine the line carefully and dispassionately. Very rarely he would discover a girl that interested him; always the identical type, a girl with jet hair, inky eyes and clear silken skin. Then the trouble began.

If it was an entertainer, Strapp went backstage after the show. He bribed, fought, blustered and forced his way into her dressing room. He would confront the astonished girl, examine her in silence, then ask her to speak. He would listen to her voice, then close in like a tiger and make a violent and unexpected pass. Sometimes there would be shrieks, sometimes a spirited defense, sometimes complaisance. At no time was Strapp satisfied. He would abandon the girl abruptly, pay off all complaints and damages like a gentleman, and leave to repeat the performance in club after club until curfew.

If it was one of the guests, Strapp immediately cut in, disposed of her escort, or if that was impossible, followed the girl home and there repeated the dressing room attack. Again he would abandon the girl, pay like a gentleman and leave to continue his possessed search.

"Me, I been around, but I'm scared by it," Alceste told Fisher. "I never saw such a hasty man. He could have most any woman agreeable if he'd slow down a little. But he can't. He's driven."

"By what?"

"I don't know. It's like he's working against time."

After Strapp and Alceste became intimate, Strapp permitted him to come along on a daytime quest that was even stranger. As Strapp Associates continued its round through the planets and industries, Strapp visited the Bureau of Vital Statistics in each city. There he bribed the Chief Clerk and presented a slip of paper. On it was written:

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Height	5′ 6″
Weight	110
Hair	Black
Eyes	Black
Bust	34
Waist	26
Hips	36
Size	12

"I want the name and address of every girl over twenty-one who fits this description," Strapp would say. "I'll pay ten credits a name."

Twenty-four hours later would come the list, and off Strapp would chase on a possessed search, examining, talking, listening, sometimes making the terrifying pass, always paying off like a gentleman. The procession of tall, jet-haired, inky-eyed, busty girls made Alceste dizzy.

"He's got an *idée fixe*," Alceste told Fisher in the Cygnus Splendide, "and I got it figured this much. He's looking for a special particular girl and nobody comes up to specifications."

"A girl named Kruger?"

"I don't know if the Kruger business comes into it."

"Is he hard to please?"

"Well, I'll tell you. Some of those girls . . . me, I'd call them sensational. But he don't pay any mind to them. Just looks and moves on. Others . . . dogs, practically, he jumps like old Wasteland."

"What is it? A rape compulsion?"

"I think it's a kind of test. Something to make the girls react hard and natural. It ain't that kind of passion with old Wasteland. It's a cold-blooded trick so he can watch 'em in action."

"But what's he looking for?"

"I don't know yet," Alceste said, "but I'm going to find out. I got a little trick figured. It's taking a chance, but Johnny's worth it."

It happened in the Arena where Strapp and Alceste went to watch a pair of gorillas tear each other to pieces inside a glass cage. It was a bloody affair, and both men agreed that gorillafighting was no more civilized than cockfighting and left in disgust. Outside, in the empty concrete corridors, a shrivelled man loitered. When Alceste signalled to him, he ran up to them like an autograph hound.

"Frankie!" the shrivelled man shouted. "Good old Frankie! Don't you remember me?"

Alceste stared.

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"I'm Blooper Davis. We was raised together in the old precinct. Don't you remember Blooper Davis?"

"Blooper!" Alceste's face lit up. "Sure enough. But it was Blooper Davidoff then."

"Sure," the shrivelled man laughed. "And it was Frankie Kruger then."

"Kruger!" Strapp cried in a thin screeching voice.

"That's right," Frankie said. "Kruger. I changed my name when I went into the fight game." He motioned sharply to the shrivelled man who backed against the corridor wall and slid away.

"You son of a bitch!" Strapp cried. His face was white and twitched hideously. "You goddamned lousy murdering bastard! I've been waiting for this. I've waited ten years."

He whipped a flat gun from his inside pocket and fired. Alceste sidestepped barely in time and the slug ricochetted down the corridor with a high whine. Strapp fired again and the flame seared Alceste's cheek. He closed in, caught Strapp's wrist and paralyzed it with his powerful grip. He pointed the gun away and clinched. Strapp's breath was hissing. His eyes rolled. Overhead sounded the wild roars of the crowd.

"All right, I'm Kruger," Alceste grunted. "Kruger's the name, Mr. Strapp. So what? What are you going to do about it?"

"Son of a bitch!" Strapp screamed, struggling like one of the gorillas. "Killer! Murderer! I'll rip your guts out!"

"Why me? Why Kruger?" Exerting all his strength, Alceste dragged Strapp to a niche and slammed him into it. He caged him with his huge frame. "What did I ever do to you ten years ago?"

He got the story in hysterical animal outbursts before Strapp fainted.

After he put Strapp to bed, Alceste went out into the lush living room of the suite in the Indi Splendide and explained to the staff.

"Old Johnny was in love with a girl named Sima Morgan," he began. "She was in love with him. It was big romantic stuff. They were going to be married. Then Sima Morgan got killed by a guy named Kruger."

"Kruger! So that's the connection. How?"

"This Kruger was a drunken no-good. Society. He had a bad driving record. They took his license away from him, but that didn't make any difference to Kruger's kind of money. He bribed a dealer and bought a hot rod jet without a license. One day he buzzed a school for the hell of it. He smashed the roof in and killed thirteen children and their teacher . . . This was on Terra in Berlin."

"Jesus," the burly man whispered.

"They never got Kruger. He started planet hopping and he's still on the lam. The family sends him money. The police can't find him. Strapp's

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looking for him because the school teacher was his girl, Sima Morgan."

There was a pause, then Fisher asked: "How long ago was this?"

"Near as I can figure, ten years eight months."

Fisher calculated intently. "And ten years three months ago, Strapp first showed he could make decisions. The Big Decisions. Up to then he was nobody. Then came the tragedy, and with it the hysteria and the ability. Don't tell me one didn't produce the other."

"Nobody's telling you anything."

"So he kills Kruger over and over again," Fisher said coldly. "Right. Revenge fixation. But what about the girls and the Wasteland business?"

Alceste smiled sadly. "You ever hear the expression, 'One girl in a million'?"

"Who hasn't?"

"If your girl was one in a million, that means there ought to be nine more like her in a city of ten million, yes?"

The Strapp staff nodded, wondering.

"Old Johnny's working on that idea. He thinks he can find Sima Morgan's duplicate."

"How?"

"He's worked it out arithmeticwise. He's thinking like so: There's one chance in 64 billion of fingerprints matching. But today there's 1700 billion people. That means there can be 26 with one matching print, and maybe more."

"Not necessarily."

"Sure not necessarily, but there's the chance and that's all old Johnny wants. He figures if there's 26 chances of one print matching there's an outside chance of one person matching. He thinks he can find Sima Morgan's duplicate if he just keeps on looking hard enough."

"That's outlandish!"

"I didn't say it wasn't, but it's the only thing that keeps him going. It's a kind of life preserver made out of numbers. It keeps his head above water . . . the crazy notion that sooner or later he can pick up where death left him off ten years ago."

"Ridiculous!" Fisher snapped.

"Not to Johnny. He's still in love."

"Impossible."

"I wish you could feel it like I feel it," Alceste answered. "He's looking . . . looking. He meets girl after girl. He hopes. He talks. He makes the pass. If it's Sima's duplicate he knows she'll respond just the way he remembers Sima responding ten years ago. 'Are you Sima?' he asks himself. 'No,' he says, and moves on. It hurts, thinking about a lost guy like that. We ought to do something for him."

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"No," Fisher said.

"We ought to help him find his duplicate. We ought to coax him into believing some girl's the duplicate. We ought to make him fall in love again."

"No," Fisher repeated emphatically.

"Why no?"

"Because the moment Strapp finds his girl, he heals himself. He stops being the great John Strapp, the Decider. He turns back into a nobody . . . a man in love."

"What's he care about being great? He wants to be happy."

"Everybody wants to be happy," Fisher snarled. "Nobody is. Strapp's no worse off than any other man, but he's a lot richer. We maintain the status quo."

"Don't you mean you're a lot richer?"

"We maintain the status quo," Fisher repeated. He eyed Alceste coldly. "I think we'd better terminate the contract. We have no further use for your services."

"Mister, we terminated when I handed back the check. You're talking to Johnny's friend, now."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Alceste, but Strapp won't have much time for his friends from now on. I'll let you know when he'll be free next year."

"You'll never pull it off. I'll see Johnny when and where I please."

"Do you want him for a friend?" Fisher smiled unpleasantly. "Then you'll see him when and where I please. Either you see him on those terms or Strapp sees the contract we gave you. I still have it in the files, Mr. Alceste. I did not tear it up. I never part with anything. How long do you imagine Strapp will believe in your friendship after he sees the contract you signed?"

Alceste clenched his fists. Fisher held his ground. For a moment they glared at each other, then Frankie turned away.

"Poor Johnny," he muttered. "It's like a man being run by his tapeworm. I'll say so long to him. Let me know when you're ready for me to see him again."

He went into the bedroom where Strapp was just awakening from his attack without the faintest memory, as usual. Alceste sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Hey, old Johnny," he grinned.

"Hey, Frankie," Strapp smiled.

They punched each other solemnly, which is the only way that men friends can embrace and kiss.

"What happened after that gorillafight?" Strapp asked. "I got fuzzy."

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"Man, you got plastered. I never saw a guy take on such a load." Alceste punched Strapp again. "Listen, old Johnny, I got to get back to work. I got a three-picture-a-year contract and they're howling."

"Why, you took a month off six planets back," Strapp said in disappointment. "I thought you caught up."

"Nope. I'll be pulling out today, Johnny. Be seeing you real soon."

"Listen," Strapp said. "To hell with the pictures. Be my partner. I'll tell Fisher to draw up an agreement." He blew his nose. "This is the first time I've had laughs in — in a long time."

"Maybe later, Johnny. Right now I'm stuck with a contract. Soon as I can get back, I'll come a-running. Cheers."

"Cheers," Strapp said wistfully.

Outside the bedroom, Fisher was waiting like a watchdog. Alceste looked at him with disgust.

"One thing you learn in the fight game," he said slowly. "It's never won till the last round. I give you this one, but it isn't the last."

As he left, Alceste said, half to himself, half aloud, "I want him to be happy. I want every man to be happy. Seems like every man could be happy if we'd all just lend a hand."

Which is why Frankie Alceste couldn't help making friends.

So the Strapp staff settled back into the same old watchful vigilance of the murdering years, and stepped up Strapp's Decision appointments to two a week. They knew why Strapp had to be watched. They knew why the Krugers had to be protected. But that was the only difference. Their man was miserable, hysteric, almost psychotic; it made no difference. That was a fair price to pay for 1 per cent of the world.

But Frankie Alceste kept his own counsel, and visited the Deneb laboratories of Bruxton Biotics. There he consulted with one E. T. A. Goland, the research genius who had discovered that novel technique for moulding life which first brought Strapp to Bruxton, and was indirectly responsible for his friendship with Alceste. Ernst Theodor Amadeus Goland was short, fat, asthmatic and enthusiastic.

"But yes, yes," he sputtered when the layman had finally made himself clear to the scientist. "Yes indeed! A most ingenious notion. Why it never occurred to me, I cannot think. It could be accomplished without any difficulty. Without any difficulty whatsoever." He considered. "Except money," he added.

"You could duplicate the girl that died ten years ago?" Alceste asked.

"Without any difficulty, except money." Goland nodded emphatically.

"She'd look the same? Act the same? Be the same?"

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"Up to 95 per cent plus or minus point nine seven five."

"Would that make any difference? I mean 95 per cent of a person as against 100 per cent."

"Ach! No. It is a most remarkable individual who is aware of more than 80 per cent of the total characteristics of another person. Above 90 per cent is unheard of."

"How would you go about it?"

"Ach? So. Empirically we have two sources. One: Complete psychological pattern of the subject in the Centaurus Master Files. They will TT a transcript upon application and payment of Cr. 100 through formal channels. I will apply."

"And I'll pay. Two?"

"Two: The embalmment process of modern times which — she is buried, yes?"

"Yes."

"Which is 98 per cent perfect. From remains and psychological pattern we reconstruct body and psyche by the equation sigma equals square root of minus two over — we do it without any difficulty, except money."

"Me, I've got the money," Frankie Alceste said. "You do the rest."

For the sake of his friend, Alceste paid Cr. 100 and expedited the formal application to the Master Files on Centaurus for the transcript of the complete psychological pattern of Sima Morgan, deceased. After it arrived, Alceste returned to Terra and a city called Berlin where he blackmailed a gimpster named Augenblick into turning graverobber. Augenblick visited the *Staats-Gottesacker* and removed the porcelain coffin from under the marble headstone that read SIMA MORGAN. It contained what appeared to be a black-haired, silken skinned girl in deep sleep. By devious routes, Alceste got the porcelain coffin through four customs barriers to Deneb.

One aspect of the trip of which Alceste was not aware but which bewildered various police organizations, was the series of catastrophes which pursued him and never quite caught up. There was the jet liner explosion that destroyed the ship and an acre of docks half an hour after passengers and freight were discharged. There was a hotel holocaust ten minutes after Alceste checked out. There was the shuttle disaster which extinguished the pneumatic train for which Alceste had unexpectedly cancelled passage. Despite all this he was able to present the coffin to biochemist Goland.

"Ach!" said Ernst Theodor Amadeus. "A beautiful creature. She is worth recreating. The rest now is simple, except money."

For the sake of his friend, Alceste arranged a leave of absence for Goland, bought him a laboratory and financed an incredibly expensive series of experiments. For the sake of his friend, Alceste poured forth money and

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patience until at last, eight months later, there emerged from the opaque maturation chamber, a black-haired, inky-eyed, silken skinned creature with long legs and a high full bust. She answered to the name of Sima Morgan.

"I heard the jet coming down toward the school," Sima said, unaware that she was speaking eleven years later. "Then I heard a crash. What happened?"

Alceste was jolted. Up to this moment she had been an objective . . . a goal . . . unreal, unalive. This was a living woman. There was a curious hesitation in her speech, almost a lisp. Her head had an engaging tilt when she spoke. She arose from the edge of the table, and she was not fluid or graceful as Alceste had expected she would be. She moved boyishly. Suddenly she realized she was nude and blushed. It was the first time Alceste had ever seen a blushing nude, and he was inexpressibly moved to see the blush flood up from her waist to her bosom and then to her throat and face. He stepped forward quickly with a robe and put it around her.

"I'm Frank Alceste," he said quietly. He adjusted the robe, then took her shoulders. "I want you to look at me and make up your mind whether you can trust me."

Their eyes locked in a steady gaze. Sima examined him gravely. Again Alceste was jolted and moved. His hands began to tremble and he released the girl's shoulders in panic.

"Yes," Sima said. "I can trust you."

"No matter what I say, you must trust me. No matter what I tell you to do, you must trust me and do it."

"Why?"

"For the sake of Johnny Strapp."

Her eyes widened. "Something's happened to him," she said quickly. "What is it?"

"Not to him, Sima. To you. Be patient, honey. I'll explain. I had it in my mind to explain now, but I can't. I . . . I'd best wait until tomorrow."

They put her to bed and Alceste went out for a wrestling match with himself. The Deneb nights are soft and black as velvet, thick and sweet with romance . . . or so it seemed to Frankie Alceste that night.

"You can't be falling in love with her," he muttered. "It's crazy."

And later: "You saw hundreds like her when Johnny was hunting. Why didn't you fall for one of them?"

And last of all: "What are you going to do?"

He did the only thing an honorable man can do in a situation like that, and tried to turn his desire into friendship. He came into Sima's room the next morning, wearing tattered old jeans, needing a shave, with his hair

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standing on end. He hoisted himself up on the foot of her bed, and while she ate the first of the careful meals Goland had prescribed, Frankie chewed on a cigarette and explained what had happened to her. When she wept, he did not take her in his arms to console her, but thumped her on the back like a brother.

He ordered a dress for her. He had ordered the wrong size, and when she showed herself to him in it, she looked so adorable that he wanted to kiss her. Instead, he punched her, very gently and very solemnly, and took her out to buy a wardrobe. When she showed herself to him in proper clothes, she looked so enchanting that he had to punch her again. Then they went to a ticket office and booked immediate passage for Ross-Alpha III.

Alceste had intended delaying a few days to rest the girl, but he was compelled to rush for fear of himself. It was this alone that saved both from the explosion that destroyed the private home and private laboratory of biochemist Goland, and destroyed the biochemist too. Alceste never knew this. He was already on board ship with Sima, frantically fighting temptation.

One of the things that everybody knows about space travel but never mentions is its aphrodisiac quality. Like the ancient days when travellers crossed oceans on ships, the passengers are isolated in their own tiny world for a week. They're cut off from reality. A magic mood of freedom from ties and responsibilities pervades the jet liner. Everyone has a fling. There are thousands of jet romances every week . . . quick, passionate affairs that are enjoyed in complete safety and ended on landing day.

In this atmosphere, Frankie Alceste maintained a rigid self-control. He was not aided by the fact that he was a celebrity with tremendous animal magnetism. While a dozen handsome women threw themselves at him, he persevered in the role of the big brother and thumped and punched Sima until she protested.

"I know you're a wonderful friend to Johnny and me," she said on the last night out, "But you are exhausting, Frankie. I'm covered with bruises."

"Yeah. I know. It's habit. Some people, like Johnny, they think with their brains. Me, I think with my fists."

They were standing before the starboard crystal, bathed in the soft light of the approaching Ross-Alpha, and there is nothing more damnably romantic than the velvet of space illuminated by the white-violet of a distant sun. Sima tilted her head and looked at him.

"I was talking to some of the passengers," she said. "You're famous, aren't you?"

"More notorious like."

"There's so much to catch up on. But I must catch up on you first."

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"Me?"

Sima nodded. "It's all been so sudden. I've been bewildered . . . and so excited, that I haven't had a chance to thank you, Frankie. I do thank you. I'm beholden to you forever."

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him with parted lips. Alceste began to shake.

"No," he thought. "No. She doesn't know what she's doing. She's so crazy happy at the idea of being with Johnny again that she doesn't realize . . ."

He reached behind him until he felt the icy surface of the crystal which passengers are strictly enjoined from touching. Before he could give way, he deliberately pressed the backs of his hands against the sub-zero surface. The pain made him start. Sima released him in surprise, and when he pulled his hands away, he left six square inches of skin and blood behind.

So he landed on Ross-Alpha III with one girl in good condition and two hands in bad shape and he was met by the acid-faced Aldous Fisher accompanied by an official who requested Mr. Alceste to step into an office for a very serious private talk.

"It has been brought to our attention by Mr. Fisher," the official said, "that you are attempting to bring in a young woman of illegal status."

"How would Mr. Fisher know?" Alceste asked.

"You fool!" Fisher spat. "Did you think I would let it go at that? You were followed. Every minute."

"Mr. Fisher informs us," the official continued austerely, "that the woman with you is traveling under an assumed name. Her papers are fraudulent."

"How, fraudulent?" Alceste said. "She's Sima Morgan. Her papers say she's Sima Morgan."

"Sima Morgan died eleven years ago," Fisher answered. "The woman with you can't be Sima Morgan."

"And unless the question of her true identity is cleared up," the official said, "she will not be permitted entry."

"I'll have the documentation on Sima Morgan's death here within the week," Fisher added triumphantly.

Alceste looked at Fisher and shook his head wearily. "You don't know it, but you're making it easy for me," he said. "The one thing in the world I'd like to do is take her out of here and never let Johnny see her. I'm so crazy to keep her for myself that—" He stopped himself and touched the bandages on his hands. "Withdraw your charge, Fisher."

"No," Fisher snapped.

"You can't keep 'em apart. Not this way. Suppose she's interned? Who's

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the first man I subpoena to establish her identity? John Strapp. Who's the first man I call to come and see her? John Strapp. D'you think you could stop him?"

"That contract," Fisher began. "I'll —"

"To hell with the contract. Show it to him. He wants his girl, not me. Withdraw your charge, Fisher. And stop fighting. You've lost your meal ticket."

Fisher glared malevolently, then swallowed. "I withdraw the charge," he growled. Then he looked at Alceste with blood in his eyes. "It isn't the last round yet," he said, and stamped out of the office.

Fisher was prepared. At a distance of light-years he might be too late with too little. Here on Ross-Alpha III he was protecting his property. He had all the power and money of John Strapp to call on. The floater that Frankie Alceste and Sima took from the spaceport was piloted by a Fisher aide who unlatched the cabin door and performed steep banks to tumble his fares out into the air. Alceste smashed the glass partition and hooked a meaty arm around the driver's throat until he righted the floater and brought them safely to earth. Alceste was pleased to note that Sima did not fuss more than necessary.

On the road level they were picked up by one of a hundred cars which had been pacing the floater from below. At the first shot, Alceste clubbed Sima into a doorway and followed her at the expense of a burst shoulder which he bound hastily with strips of Sima's lingerie. Her dark eyes were enormous but she made no complaint. Alceste complimented her with mighty thumps and took her up to the roof and down into the adjoining building where he broke into an apartment and telephoned for an ambulance.

When the ambulance arrived, Alceste and Sima descended to the street where they were met by uniformed policemen who had official instructions to pick up a couple answering to their description. Wanted: for floater robbery with assault. Dangerous. Shoot to kill. The police, Alceste disposed of, and also the ambulance driver and interne. He and Sima departed in the ambulance, Alceste driving like a fury, Sima operating the siren like a banshee.

They abandoned the ambulance in the downtown shopping district, entered a department store, and emerged 40 minutes later as a young valet in uniform pushing an old man in a wheelchair. Outside the difficulty of the bust, Sima was boyish enough to pass as a valet. Frankie was weak enough from assorted injuries to simulate the old man.

They checked into the Ross Splendide where Alceste barricaded Sima

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in a suite, had his shoulder attended to, and bought a gun. Then he went looking for John Strapp. He found him in the Bureau of Vital Statistics, bribing the Chief Clerk and presenting him with a slip of paper that read:

Height	5′ 6″
Weight	110
Hair	Black
Eyes	Black
Bust	34
Waist	26
Hips	36
Size	12

"Hey, old Johnny," Alceste said.

"Hey, Frankie!" Strapp cried in delight.

They punched each other affectionately. With a happy grin, Alceste watched Strapp explain and offer further bribes to the Chief Clerk for the names and addresses of all girls over twenty-one who fitted the description on the slip of paper. As they left, Alceste said: "I met a girl who might fit that, old Johnny."

That cold look came into Strapp's eyes. "Oh?" he said.

"She's got a kind of half lisp."

Strapp looked at Alceste strangely.

"And a funny way of tilting her head when she talks."

Strapp clutched Alceste's arm.

"Only trouble is, she isn't girlie-girlie like most. More like a fella. You know what I mean? Spunky-like."

"Show her to me, Frankie," Strapp said in a low voice.

They hopped a floater and were taxied to the Ross Splendide roof. They took the elevator down to the twentieth floor and walked to suite 20-M. Alceste code-knocked on the door. A girl's voice called, "Come in." Alceste shook Strapp's hand and said, "Cheers, Johnny." He unlocked the door, then walked down the hall to lean against the balcony balustrade. He drew his gun just in case Fisher might get around to last ditch interruptions. Looking out across the glittering city, he reflected that every man could be happy if everybody would just lend a hand; but sometimes that hand was expensive.

John Strapp walked into the suite. He shut the door, turned and examined the jet-haired inky-eyed girl, coldly, intently. She stared at him in amazement. Strapp stepped closer, walked around her, faced her again.

"Say something," he said.

"You're not John Strapp?" she faltered. "Not Johnny Strapp?"

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"Yes."

"No!" she exclaimed. "No! My Johnny's young. My Johnny is —"

Strapp closed in like a tiger. His hands and lips savaged her while his eyes watched coldly and intently. The girl screamed and struggled, terrified by those strange eyes that were alien, by the harsh hands that were alien, by the alien compulsions of the creature who was once her Johnny Strapp but was now aching years of change apart from her.

"You're someone else!" she cried. "You're not Johnny Strapp. You're another man."

And Strapp, not so much eleven years older as eleven years other than the man whose memory he was fighting to fulfill, asked himself: "Are you my Sima? Are you my love . . . my lost dead love?" And the change within him answered: "No, this isn't Sima. This isn't your love yet. Move on, Johnny. Move on and search. You'll find her some day . . . the girl you lost."

He paid like a gentleman and departed.

From the balcony, Alceste saw him leave. He was so astonished he could not call to him. He went back to the suite and found Sima standing there, stunned, staring at a sheaf of money on a table. He realized what had happened at once. When Sima saw Alceste, she began to cry . . . not like a girl, but boyishly, with her fists clenched and her face screwed up.

"Frankie," she wept. "My God! Frankie!" She held out her arms to him in desperation. She was lost in a world that had passed her by.

He took a step, then hesitated. He made a last attempt to quench the love for this creature within him, searching for a way to bring her and Strapp together. Then he lost all control and took her in his arms.

"She doesn't know what she's doing," he thought. "She's so scared of being lost. She's not mine. Not yet. Maybe never."

And then: "Fisher's won, and I've lost."

And last of all: "We only remember the past; we never know it when we meet it. The mind goes back, but time goes on, and farewells should be forever."

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It has been argued, with some justice, that human beings at present never truly succeed in communicating with each other, since verbal concepts can never have identical meaning in two minds. Some authors present a picture of future clarity with the development of our hypothetically latent telepathic powers; but this literal meeting of minds may, as Peter Phillips shows us, offer fresh dangers all its own.

The Warning

by PETER PHILLIPS

He was an expensive man. Walls of concrete, walls of brick, barriers of steel, of compacted hydrocarbons, more steel, then miles of wasteland isolated him and his helpers from the world.

Outside the perimeter of wire, men in uniforms guarded with their little weapons the Biggest Weapon of All, although its vital factors existed, as yet, only in the brain of the expensive man.

One night, the expensive man sent all his helpers away, on one pretext or another, beyond the far perimeter of barbed wire. Although the theories in his brain might account for the deaths of many thousands of people he had never known, he had no desire to risk the lives of those he did know in an initial experiment.

On video screens and through loudspeakers, some of his trusted assistants watched and heard him enter the underground chamber from which he would conduct the experiment by remote control. Beside them stood cursing Government men saying: "He has no right to do this. . . . Supposing anything happens to him. . . ."

At midnight, halfway through the experiment, it happened. Concrete, brick, steel, compacted hydrocarbons flowered into dust in the center of the forbidden area. And despite the protection of his shelter, most of the expensive man died.

Later, men in plain clothes guarded what was left of him.

The wake had been going on for two years now.

The four security men sat in turn in a corner of the silent room. They

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sat there for six hours each. From noon to 6, from 6 to midnight, midnight to 6, 6 to noon.

At first, they had looked at the dead thing on the bed and wondered how it felt to be dead and buried in your own body.

Now they read detective novels and smoked or looked through the double-paned windows at the silent traffic in the street below.

They were not callous. But speculation and pity had been exhausted early in the two-year vigil.

Yet they still tiptoed into the room when their shift began. On this day, Johnson settled his broad backside in the just-vacated chair and opened a paperback.

A nurse glanced over from the bed where she was checking the circulation pump.

She said, "Talkative, aren't you?"

He shrugged and switched his eyes to the thing on the bed.

"He can't hear," said the nurse thinly. "He can't hear or see or speak or feel. He's dead. Why don't you let him die?"

Johnson regarded her in silence for a moment. Then he got up, grasped her wrist gently, led her to the door.

When she had gone, white-faced but unprotesting, he took up the wall-phone: "Nurse Byers has cracked."

The superintendent, who was a good neurosurgeon, came in with the new nurse and instructed her in the simple duties. She had already been screened psychologically and for security.

Johnson strolled outside with the super for a few moments.

Dr. MacIntyre said, "You're a tough egg, Bert. What do you think about?"

"My kids, my roses and whodunit. I've quit thinking about — him. He's like a sealed package of goods or a safe. I'm just looking after it until you figure a way to open it without busting what's inside."

"It may be a long wait." MacIntyre flexed his short powerful surgeon's fingers, white and crinkled from constant aseptic washing. "Techniques are developing all the time. But the central nervous system isn't a kid's constructor set. It may be years before we have the know-how to open your prize package."

"Why our package?"

"Isn't it? If he was my private patient, instead of a possession of the government, I'd have eased him out of it long ago; given him the quietus and let his soul go a-roaming. You were scared that Nurse Byers might do just that. She was the tenth we've had on this case."

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Johnson's eyes were green and clear. He looked intently at the surgeon as they reached a branching corridor. He was paid to be suspicious.

MacIntyre's smile was tinged with a sneer. "No, I'm not a nurse. I shan't crack, Bert. I want to know what's inside the package too. But — excuse the dramatics — I also wanted to know how it feels to be the jailer of a soul."

Johnson said, "I'm doing a job. Maybe I don't like it. But don't spring poetry on me."

Johnson went back to the silent room and his chair in the corner and his paperback mystery.

A background thought, holding the indirect vision of an intense purple flare, a microsecond of agony, a red stream of numbers and symbols and a terrible fear, came into his mind and was suppressed before it made contact with the higher centers.

Johnson thought about his kids, his roses and whodunit; and the living part of the dead thing on the bed sent a cry of frustration and despair into the lonely well of the universe.

It would have to be a child. The grown mind was calloused, stultified, guarded by a censor. Wordless thoughts from outside were suppressed as intrusive, impossible fancies.

The ten woman-minds had been more receptive, but their reactions had been of compassion, not understanding.

(So there could be compassion without understanding?)

They had seen his pictures of death and flame not as a warning, but as a plea for release from personal agony. And one by one, just as he had a good grasp on the tendrils of their intuition, they had been taken out of range before he could correct the impressions; before he could show them the relationship between certain mathematical symbols and a thing which must not be done.

It was not telepathy as he had once understood it, because its range seemed limited. Whatever it was, he knew his ability had grown. But still he could not verbalize. Only pictorial communication was possible.

A line of symbols, a flame girdling a great globe — ridiculously like the papier-mâché globe that had adorned a classroom in his grade school — then back to the symbols, with a black, negating cross over them.

That part was now automatic: sending, sending, sending into the blackness, like the radar marker and the radio buoy he'd developed during the war, before his mathematic genius had been conscripted for nuclear research; before that solo, secret, empiric probe, based on a half-understood question, had given him the dreaded answer and killed his body in the same second.

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Time. How long had he been dead?

How long had it been since that strangely tortured milligram of matter had erupted — how long would it be before someone else made a hell-inspired guess and tortured a larger quantity of matter in the same way, to send an unquenchable flame circling the world?

A pool of neurons, trained and specialized over the unfeeling years, whirled and sent forth the automatic signal of agony and warning in elementary pictures.

Johnson blinked at a page of his thriller. Black spots formed a vague cross on the print and there was a slight red haze. Liver trouble. Or maybe he was reading too much.

He glanced at the new nurse. There was a moistness in her eyes as she looked at the thing on the bed but her hands were steady as she check-charted the blood-surrogate composition on the meters.

A looker, too. The uniform didn't flatten all her curves.

Eyes off, Bert Johnson. Wonder what Marie's fixing for dinner?

It would have to be a child, a half-formed mind, open and innocent. He must drive the warning in, scribe the formula and the negating cross on the tender cells. As the child grew, it would seek understanding of the symbols. It would qualify for a hearing on this matter —

A dream of years, when the hot flame (he would not fool himself) might come at any moment.

What fools spoke of verbal telepathy —

Out, further out, to find a child, to tell a child, to plant a guide and an urgent ferment in the mind of a child. Extend the range, each beating cell crying for surcease from the effort.

The energy spent in holding back the final darkness would be dissipated. It would mean death. The barrier would go and the blackness beyond would whelm in.

The eleventh nurse took the metabolism charts to Dr. MacIntyre.

He looked at them and wondered if the thing on the bed was willing itself to death.

"Thanks, Tommy," said the shoeshine customer at the stand opposite the Washington hospital.

Pocket the coin, face the new pair of brogues, get a shine, get a good shine, like the sun that shimmered on the trees down the further avenue and gave people blue-black shadows.

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Like the hurtful shine that kept coming into his brain, burning there without sense or purpose.

Flip and slap that sliding cloth in a rhythm counterpointing the beat at the back of his brain.

Delta doo over hexta how
Two three square and nullity now
Infinity marker strike three and out
Line over curve and two dots round about
Finagle the eight-ball and splinter your cue
A canter in Cantor evolved by a Jew
A terrible zero a light you can't see
A zero a zero a zerozerozerozerozero —

"You don't look good," said the pair of brogues kindly.

"Don' feel good," he said, knuckling his eyes. He wanted to turn round and look at a window in the hospital over the way, but that would be crazy too.

Put the brogues together, let them merge; see the feet inside them boil and surge; see the redhot sun come sweeping down, burning Maggie and Ma and crippled Lemuel, houses and earth melting like candy on a stove.

Tenement on fire.

Must go home. Ma can't get Lem down them stairs alone.

It's hurting my head.

Driving hard into that unprotected mind at the limit of range. It's killing me. Let the child grow up, God, and warn. Stay the fires until the child grows up. Done my best and it's finished me.

I'm going, God. Or I'm coming —

The metabolism meter suddenly registered zero.

The hell with the stand. Must get home. Ma needs me. Tenement on fire. Run. Cross here for downtown. Can get in front of that truck —

NO

It was just in front of the casualty entrance to the hospital. After they'd set the leg and the anesthetic had worn off, a nurse heard his rambling and thought she recognized some Greek symbols.

She brought a doctor. He listened and shrugged. "Some kid rhyme," he said. "Don't you recognise him? It's Tommy. Runs a shoeshine stand at the corner. He's 45, but he's got the arrested mentality of a child of seven. He'll never grow up."

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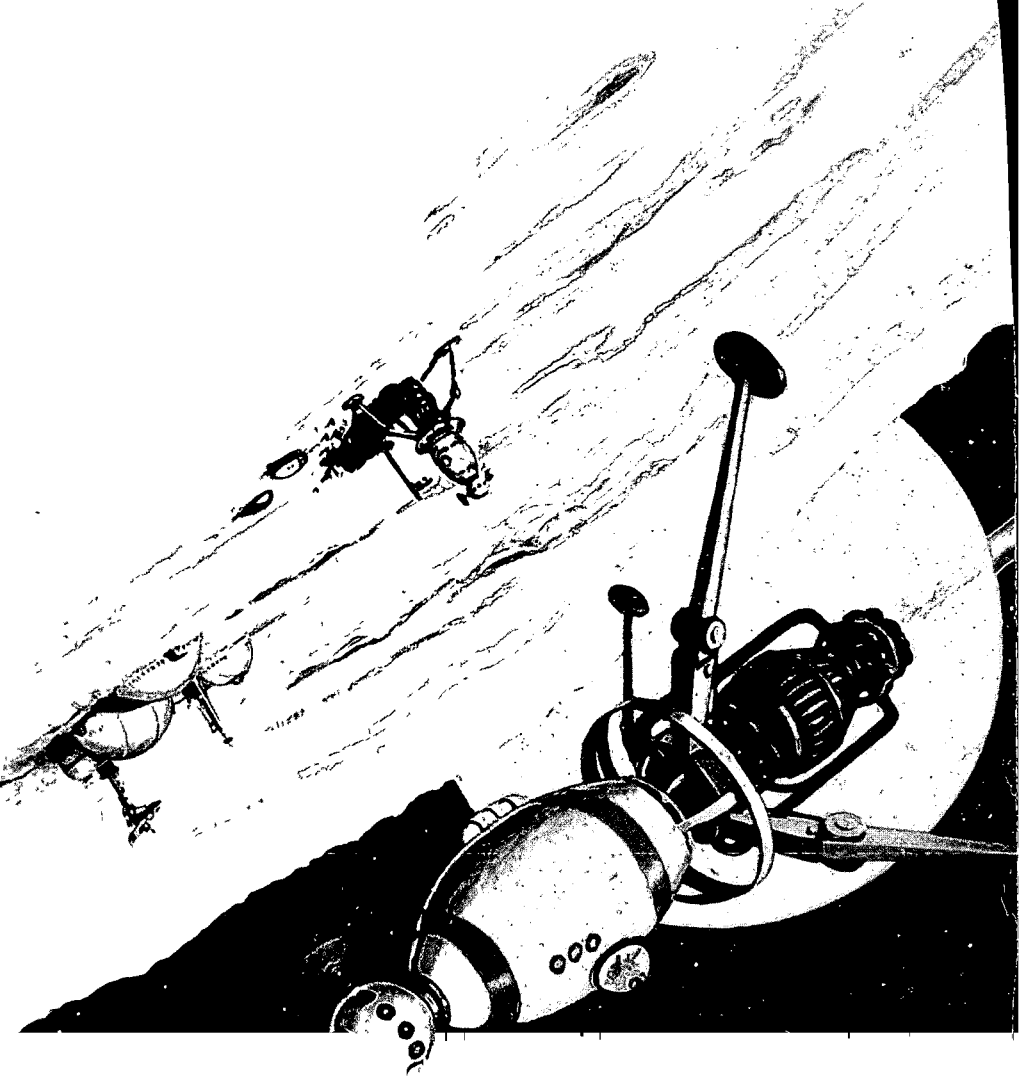

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